



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Thursday 24 March 2022

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 24 March 2022

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

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good morning. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would appreciate short and succinct questions and answers.

### Census 2022

1. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the next steps in collating Scotland's census data. (S6O-00918)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):** Scotland's census day was Sunday 20 March, and I am pleased to say that census returns are currently in line with our expected targets. I thank everyone who has taken the time to participate. The aim of the census is to deliver a set of questions and associated guidance that enables all of Scotland's people to access, understand and complete the census. Every household in Scotland has a legal obligation to complete a census return, and National Records of Scotland has ensured that people are able to access a range of help and support to do so.

**David Torrance:** Although census day was on Sunday, will the cabinet secretary take the opportunity to highlight the importance of completing the census and outline what scope there is for people who have not responded yet to send back returns, now that census day has passed?

**Angus Robertson:** Scotland's census 2022 is the official count of every person and household in the country, and it is the only questionnaire of its kind to ask everybody the same questions at the same time. We have relied on the information from censuses for more than 200 years. It remains the best way to gather vital information for Government, councils, the national health service and a range of users in the public, private and third sectors.

There is still time to submit responses. Although census day was last Sunday, National Records of

Scotland is still accepting submissions. Support is available to all households to help them to complete their census, online or via a free helpline. For people who need the number, it is 0800 030 8308.

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** There were difficulties across my region for individuals who were struggling to get paper copies. What assessment has been done to ensure that they received their paper copies on time? If they did not, what outcomes are expected from that?

**Angus Robertson:** The feedback that I have had on the work of the contact centre, which is where people called to secure a written census questionnaire, is that it has been going well. As with any large-scale operation—there are more than 1.2 million households in Scotland—there will always be administrative shortcomings. If the member would forward me any specific details on the cases that have been raised, I would be happy to look at those.

What has been reported to me is the efficient working of the contact centre. There were obviously large numbers of calls at the beginning of the census operations, but, since then, waiting times have reduced significantly and people who require paper copies of the questionnaire have been receiving them.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Constituents have contacted me because they were unsure what was meant by Scots in the question on how and when they use Scots. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body recognises that Scots includes Doric and Lallans as well as Glaswegian, Shetland, Orcadian and so on. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the data may not be accurate because people wrongly believe that they do not use Scots?

**Angus Robertson:** Christine Grahame and any other members who have constituents who are uncertain about any of the questions that have been put to them should please draw their attention to the fact that there is very extensive guidance on the Scotland's Census website. There is also a free helpline on the number that I have given: 0800 030 8308. If people have questions about Scots or anything else, they should please raise them directly and receive the guidance that they require to complete the census to their satisfaction.

### Apprenticeships

2. **John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it can take to demonstrate the viability of apprentice programmes as an alternative to a university

education, in light of a Universities and Colleges Admissions Service report published in 2021 reportedly showing that young people are advised against apprenticeships. (S6O-00919)

**The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn):** In Scotland, we have committed to maximising apprenticeship opportunities as a key way for employers to invest in their workforce, providing the skills that the economy needs now and for the future.

We recognise that apprenticeships are demanded. It is critical that we promote their benefits and the fact that undertaking apprenticeships is a key way for individuals to learn while they earn and for employers to ensure that their workforce has the skills that are needed now and for the future.

Skills Development Scotland's all-age career service and our developing the young workforce school co-ordinators, as well as events such as Scottish apprenticeship week, are ensuring that young people are aware of all the options that they have and are supported to make an informed choice about their post-school destination.

**John Mason:** Does the minister accept that some schools appear to overemphasise university? Although going to university is a tremendous achievement for many young people, apprenticeships are the right way forward for others.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Fundamentally, the answer is yes. I refer back to Mr Mason's question with regard to the concerns arising from the UCAS report. That report did not cover Scotland's perspective. I perceive a change in schools in that they are doing more to promote apprenticeships as a good destination for young people. We need to do more in that regard, and we will continue to promote apprenticeships as a very good option for all young people through the array of activities that we are undertaking through developing the young workforce.

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** Through meeting apprenticeship providers, I have heard that small and medium-sized enterprises need to upskill. However, accessing the available funding can be difficult for micro SMEs because they do not have the time or the resources to look for funding or complete applications. The red tape results in fewer people being taken on. What action will the Scottish Government take to simplify the process for taking on apprentices or upskilling current staff?

**Jamie Hepburn:** On the suggestion that fewer apprentices are being taken on, that is not the case. The most recent set of statistics shows 1.8 times the number of modern apprenticeship starts this year, and there were nearly twice the number

last year. It is important to place those statistics on the record. Nevertheless, I recognise that it is incumbent on us to hear that feedback. I have discussed the matter with SDS previously, and my clear position is that the organisation should continuously consider the process for applying for support and that I expect it to undertake work when improvements are needed.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** I appreciate the minister's answers so far. Can he comment more widely on any Scottish Government plans to strengthen the partnership working between secondary schools, businesses and colleges, particularly on trade apprenticeships, to ensure that young people have a chance to get a taster of trades and make fully informed career choices?

**The Presiding Officer:** Can the minister comment widely and briefly?

**Jamie Hepburn:** I will do my level best to square that circle, Presiding Officer.

I agree that there is a need to improve young people's experience of workplace learning. Fundamentally, that is what our developing the young workforce initiative is all about. It is making progress and will continue to do so.

### Social Care

3. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the current levels of unmet need and staff vacancies in social care. (S6O-00920)

**The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart):** The Scottish Government is aware that the social care sector at present faces significant pressures, including because of high levels of unmet need, and the situation is under constant review. We recognise that the number of staff who are unavailable due to absence and the number of vacancies are key challenges in addressing that unmet need. The cross-sectoral adult social care gold group meets fortnightly, providing strategic national oversight on system pressures and resilience, alongside key partners.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I have recently restarted fortnightly meetings with reps from local areas that face the most acute social care pressures, and our discussions focus on reducing system pressures.

A series of "lessons learned" events are being planned with health and social care partnerships at which to explore learning and share best practice in responding to recent system pressures. The first such event is scheduled for 25 March 2022.

**The Presiding Officer:** Could you please conclude, minister?

**Kevin Stewart:** In October, in response to anticipated system pressures, the Scottish Government announced £300 million in winter pressures funding to increase social care capacity.

**Colin Smyth:** The minister did not say what the current assessed level of vacancies is. I can tell him that, in Dumfries and Galloway, there are more than 100 vacancies and 3,000 hours of unmet need at the moment, which is causing significant levels of delayed discharge. The minister will surely accept that, several months after the Government announced what the level of pay for carers would be, it is clearly not managing to fill vacancies. Unless the Government increases the pay rise, we will continue to have a crisis of unmet need and a huge number of vacancies.

**Kevin Stewart:** We are well aware of the vacancies, and we have done a lot to get more folk into social care and retain the staff that we have. In recent times, we have got 1,000 additional folk into health and social care posts.

The Scottish Government is fully committed to the principles of fair work, which is why we announced the two recent pay rises. We pay more here than is paid in Wales, which is Labour run, and south of the border.

We know that there is more to do, and we are committed to national pay bargaining in our national care service proposals. However, we will do more before then, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others.

### Food Banks

4. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the consultation on a draft national plan to end the need for food banks. (S6O-00921)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison):** No one should have to rely on charitable food provision, which is why we are developing a national plan to end the need for food banks. There have been more than 400 responses to our consultation, which will now be independently analysed to inform our final national plan.

My aim is that the plan will further progress our human rights approach and strengthen our cash-first response. There are early indications that the approach is making a difference, with the Trussell Trust reporting a marked reduction in the number of emergency food bank parcels in Scotland

between April and September 2021 compared with 2019.

**Colin Beattie:** I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement that it plans to increase eight Scottish social security benefits by 6 per cent from 1 April. I hope that that will help to support my constituents who have been impacted by United Kingdom Government welfare cuts.

Does the cabinet secretary share my concerns about the growing demand for food banks and the impact that UK Government welfare cuts have had on the most vulnerable people in our society?

**Shona Robison:** Yes, I do. That is why I am committed to publishing a plan that will use the powers that we have to make food banks the last port of call. We have been doing all we can to mitigate the impact of cuts and, last year, we invested more than £2.5 billion to support low-income households. However, we do all that with one hand tied.

Colin Beattie referred to benefit cuts. The devastating cut to universal credit was the biggest overnight cut to benefits since the welfare state was established. Yesterday, the chancellor's statement was a missed opportunity that completely failed to help people in need, as evidenced by devastating analysis that has been carried out by the Resolution Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

### Homes for Ukraine Scheme

5. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding matching Ukrainian refugees with households in Scotland that have registered under the homes for Ukraine scheme. (S6O-00922)

**The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray):** We continue to work closely with the UK Government on the design and operation of the homes for Ukraine scheme. We are focused on ensuring a smooth and early flow of data to support the operation of the Scottish Government's supersponsor programme and to meet our objectives for a warm and well-delivered welcome for all those who arrive in Scotland. Just yesterday, I met Lord Richard Harrington to emphasise that need.

**Liam McArthur:** I thank the minister for his response and his engagement on issues that have arisen at local level in Orkney over recent weeks.

Although 150,000 people—me included—have signed up to the homes for Ukraine scheme, only around 12,000 Ukrainian refugees have so far been given permission to come to the UK. As the

barbaric shelling of cities such as Mariupol continues, an estimated 10 million Ukrainians have already fled their homes. When does the minister expect the matching of refugees to individual households in Scotland to begin? What further support is being provided to local councils to ensure that they can meet the needs of people arriving from Ukraine?

**Neil Gray:** Obviously, we are still reliant on the UK Government's immigration system to work at pace to get through visa applications and ensure that that data comes to the Scottish Government. We are maintaining pressure on the UK Government to ensure that that happens at pace, given everything that Liam McArthur said about the situation on the ground.

We have provided more than £13 million of support that will be distributed to local authorities to acknowledge the work that will be required of them. That is over and above the £10,500 that the UK Government has committed to provide to local authorities for each person who arrives from Ukraine.

#### **General Practitioners (North East Scotland)**

6. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what assessment it has made of general practitioner numbers and surgery provision in the north-east. (S6O-00923)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** Health boards and health and social care partnerships are responsible for assessing the needs of their patients and ensuring that GPs are contracted or otherwise engaged to meet those needs. The Scottish Government funds GP practices in the north-east and elsewhere, of course, based on their estimated share of overall national workload.

**Liam Kerr:** Last week, the people of Aberdeen learned that the Great Western medical practice, with 10,000 patients, might have to take drastic measures because of a lack of GPs in the north-east. When I asked about similar situations at Carden medical centre, I got weasel words and fudge. Combined with the situation at Great Western, that means that 18,500 patients could be affected.

The people of the north-east do not want the cabinet secretary's standard pivot to what is happening in England or how many GPs there are in the central belt—they want a clear answer. What is he doing to increase the number of GPs in Aberdeen and the north-east, and in what year does he project that there will be enough?

**Humza Yousaf:** A lot is happening in Scotland, particularly in the north-east. For example, the rediscover the joy programme is being piloted in

four rural health boards in the north of Scotland. It has also been expanded to Tayside. On top of that, we have the golden hello scheme operating where there are GP shortages.

The member says that he does not want me to pivot, but he cannot hide away from the fact that the Government is committed to increasing GP numbers by 800 by 2027. We are four years into that commitment, and we have increased GP numbers by more than 250.

The member might not want to hear this, but in Scotland we have more GPs than they have in the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Liam Kerr:** What is he doing?

**Humza Yousaf:** The member might not want to hear it, but he should listen. In Scotland, we have 94 GPs per 100,000 people, but in England, where his party is in charge, that number is 76 GPs per 100,000.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take a brief supplementary from Mercedes Villalba.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** One of the key reasons that was used to justify the tendering of Old Aberdeen medical practice was to improve the sustainability of GP services in the city, but many of the city's practices are now facing closure and unsustainable GP to patient ratios, which poses a threat to patient care. The last time that I asked cabinet secretary to meet those who are affected, he said that he would consider it, but when I followed up with him I was told that he did not have time. Three months have passed, so I am asking the cabinet secretary once again whether he will meet staff and patients to hear their concerns.

**Humza Yousaf:** Of course, I will consider meeting Mercedes Villalba. The last time that she raised the issue with me, I gave her the details of the health and social care partnership where the issues are being taken forward.

I have looked at the Old Aberdeen medical practice, which she raised a moment ago, and my understanding from my conversations with the board is that more skills and more resources are now available, and that is of course good for the patients of the practice.

There were many pressures on my diary at that time, but I say again to Mercedes Villalba that, when my diary allows, I will be more than happy to meet her and campaigners.

#### **Women's Safety**

7. **Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is making the streets safer for women and girls. (S6O-00924)



**The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan):** The Scottish Government is taking a broad range of actions to ensure that women and girls are and feel safe within our communities. We are improving our laws and investing in policing, and we have proposed a new national planning policy embedding human rights and equality in decision making to deliver better places for everyone.

Our public health approach to reducing violence, including the equally safe strategy, continues to focus decisively on preventing violence and tackling the underlying attitudes that perpetuate it. Our new two-year delivering equally safe fund will award £38 million to projects that focus on early intervention and prevention.

**Gillian Martin:** I am particularly interested to ask about the excellent “Don’t be that guy” video campaign, and how it has been rolled out to reach the target audience of, I imagine, young men. Are there plans for any future campaigns and materials? Specifically, how are we assisting those who work with our young people with materials that can help them to tackle male behaviours that intimidate women and girls and ultimately put them at risk?

**Ash Regan:** Police Scotland recently launched the “Don’t be that guy” public awareness campaign asking men to challenge their own and, importantly, each other’s behaviours and attitudes towards women. It is an important message for Scottish society, including for policing as individuals and as a service.

The campaign has generated a lot of interest and seems to have been very well received. It will be good, in time, to see what impact it has.

Police Scotland has advised me that more than 6 million people worldwide have seen the “Don’t be that guy” film and more than 80,000 people have visited the website. Government organisations and police services across the UK and beyond are changing the focus of their public communication on sexual violence to align with the “Don’t be that guy” strategy.

Police Scotland is developing a number of public campaigns for the forthcoming year that target men and which, under the “Don’t be that guy” banner, are related to different aspects of men’s violence.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time. Before we move on to the next item of business, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Liesbeth Homans, Speaker of the Flemish Parliament. *[Applause.]*

## First Minister’s Question Time

12:00

### Ferries (Construction Contract)

**1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands (Con):** I begin by echoing the comments that we heard in this chamber earlier this week, following the sad and untimely passing of our friend and Scottish Conservative colleague, David Hill. David died playing the sport that he loved for the Parliament team that he helped to set up. I know from having spoken in the past couple of days to his parents, Rodger and Sharon, that they are understandably utterly devastated and heartbroken, but they are so appreciative of the support that they have received from parties across the chamber.

I also thank you, Presiding Officer, and the Scottish Parliament team, who have helped not only David’s family, but his friends and colleagues who were with him when this tragic accident occurred. *[Applause.]*

Yesterday, Audit Scotland’s damning report on the Scottish National Party Government’s failure to build two lifeline ferries was published. Kate Forbes was put forward to respond in the chamber and to the media, but she could not say who made the key decision to sign off the disastrous contract.

Therefore, can the First Minister give a straight answer where the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy could not? Which minister gave the green light for the contract—against expert advice?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** First, I take this opportunity to express my shock and distress at the untimely and tragic passing of David Hill. It is a mark of the man he was that he had such good friends right across the political spectrum in Parliament.

When David died, he was, obviously, doing what he loved most. I hope that, in time, that will be of some comfort to his loved ones. I had contact with David’s dad on Sunday, when I offered all possible help that the Scottish Government could provide. My thoughts are with Rodger, Sharon and David’s wider family and friends, and, of course, with all his Conservative Party colleagues.

Before I turn directly to the substance of the question, I say candidly that the problems with the procurement—or rather, with the construction; the procurement was not the issue—of the ferries have resulted in delay, cost overruns and a very negative impact on island communities. That is far from satisfactory, which is putting it mildly.

The report that Audit Scotland published yesterday is entirely fair and justified. There are a number of complexities, but the contracts in question are public contracts, so the buck stops with the Scottish Government. Pre-2019, there were issues with the quality of work and the progress of work when the yard was in private ownership. Since nationalisation of the yard at the end of 2019, more problems have been identified, with the cabling problem being the most significant. On top of that, of course, there has been additional delay because of Covid.

However, we remain focused on delivery of the ferries. The actions that the Scottish Government has taken have helped to secure jobs at the last remaining commercial shipbuilder on the Clyde. I think that that is important.

To turn briefly to Douglas Ross's specific question about who was transport minister at the time, I note that that is, of course, a matter of public record. It was Derek Mackay, but our Government—I understand that the idea might be alien to the Conservatives—operates under collective responsibility. Ultimately, as with any decisions, whether I am personally involved in them or not, responsibility stops with me.

Many of the documents that relate to the decision have been in the public domain for some time. They clearly narrate the issue of the lack of a full-refund guarantee. They also clearly narrate the mitigations that were put in place to reduce that risk. Those documents are in the public domain and are available for anyone to review.

**Douglas Ross:** Yesterday, the finance secretary could not tell Parliament or the media who was to blame but, 24 hours later, the SNP spin machine has spun into action and it is the fault of the disgraced former finance minister.

Let me get this absolutely straight. The First Minister is claiming that she had no involvement. The Audit Scotland report confirms that SNP ministers were aware of the huge risk of the project, but carried on regardless. The Government that she leads willingly decided to charge ahead, against expert advice. The First Minister is now trying to blame Derek Mackay. It seems to be very convenient that the person who is getting the blame is no longer here. It was the First Minister's Government, her Cabinet and her decision.

Let me ask again. She is saying that the transport minister took that decision. What input did the First Minister have in that decision, through the Government that she leads?

**The First Minister:** I am genuinely not sure whether Douglas Ross listened to a single word that I said. He asked who the individual minister was; I did not volunteer the information. It is a

matter of public record who the transport minister was at the time of the decision; it is a matter of public record that it was Derek Mackay.

Here is the bit that I know does not suit the script that Douglas Ross prepared before he came into the chamber. Here is what I went on to say. I will repeat it, just to be absolutely clear. This Government operates by collective responsibility and I am ultimately responsible for all decisions that the Government takes. The buck stops with me. I have never tried to shy away from that on any issue. I know that that is not how things are done in the Conservative Government at Westminster, but that is how things are done here. Perhaps Douglas Ross might want to reflect on what I am actually saying, before he asks his next question. I am ultimately responsible for all decisions of the Scottish Government. That is why I am standing here answering questions.

I turn to the substance of the issue. As I said, the documents are available in the public domain. Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited had expressed a particular concern about the lack of a full-refund guarantee. Those concerns are set out in the documents. So, too, are the actions that were taken to mitigate the risks. The Government then came to a decision based on the balance of risk. The documents expressed the view that the current deal that has been negotiated with Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Limited is the best deal that can be achieved, given the financial restrictions that the yard is operating under.

Three key changes were made; they are all set out in the Audit Scotland report. They were: that there was an increase in the final payment so that more money was being withheld; that CMAL would take ownership of all equipment, machinery and materials as they arrived at the shipyard; and that FMEL would require all major suppliers to offer a full-refund guarantee. Those were the changes that reduced the risk and underpinned the decision that the Government arrived at.

I return to the central point. I am not defending the cost overruns or the delay in construction of the ferries; they are completely unacceptable. However, at all points, the motivation of the Government has been to save jobs and the shipyard and to ensure that the ferries can be delivered, albeit that they will be late, which is a matter of deep regret. That is what we continue to focus on.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister says that she takes ultimate responsibility, then throws an ex-minister—a disgraced SNP ex-minister—under the bus. If we are looking for ultimate responsibility from the First Minister, will she tell us why a key safeguard that could have saved Scottish taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds was removed? Will she tell us, with her ultimate

responsibility, why Ferguson's started building the ferries when there was not even an agreed design? With her ultimate responsibility, will she tell us why Ferguson Marine was given the contract in the first place? With her ultimate responsibility, will she tell us why there is not going to be a public inquiry into the whole scandal? We need a public inquiry because Audit Scotland tried to get answers but could not. Audit Scotland has said:

"There is no documented evidence to confirm why Scottish ministers were willing to accept the risks of awarding the contract to FMEL, despite CMAL's concerns. We consider that there should have been a proper record of this important decision."

The decision is one of the most reckless decisions that have ever been taken by a Scottish Government, and so far it is costing a quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers' money. Why cannot the body in Scotland that is charged with scrutinising public spending give a shred of evidence to justify your Government's decision?

**The First Minister:** Nobody who had read Audit Scotland's report could reach that particular conclusion, but I will come back to that.

I will say, first, that if Douglas Ross thinks that it is unimportant who the individual minister was and that—as I agree—the buck stops with me, why was his first question to ask me who the individual minister was? Clearly, he must have thought that it was important. I did not intend to come here and do anything but accept full responsibility.

I come to the questions—let me answer them one by one. I have already run through the decision to proceed and the lack of the full builder's refund guarantee. That decision was clearly taken based on the balance of risks. CMAL had concerns about the matter, but a range of actions had been taken—I have set out exactly what they were—to mitigate the risks. The conclusion, which is in the documentation that is publicly available, was that the deal that was negotiated was the best one that could have been achieved in the circumstances.

I think that the second question that Douglas Ross asked me was why was the contract awarded to FMEL when it was the most expensive bid. That question, too, is answered in the Audit Scotland report. The review found that it was the most expensive bid—if memory serves me correctly, that was known at the time—but CMAL had

"also assessed it as being the highest quality",

so

"Overall, it achieved the highest combined cost and quality score of the seven bids".

That was the decision that was taken at the time. Of course, ministers are not involved in procurement decisions.

Lastly, on the question of a public inquiry, we have had a parliamentary committee look into the issue and we have now had a major Audit Scotland review. Audit Scotland itself recommends, at page 7 of its report, that on completion of the vessels, there should be

"a formal review of what went wrong ... with a view to learning lessons".

The Scottish Government will consider what form that further review should take. We will consider the matter carefully and will, of course, report to Parliament in due course.

**Douglas Ross:** This is ridiculous. We are fortunate in Scotland to have two Governments, but only one of them is currently building ships in Scotland that actually sail. That is because of this First Minister's record in government. Let us look at it again.

Ferguson Marine's was the most expensive bid figure, yet—as the First Minister has just said—it was chosen on the basis of quality. It was chosen on the basis of quality when ferries are two and half times over budget. Hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have already been wasted. There is a five-year delay at least, and there are still 175 faults with the ferries, which are still being built. This is one of the worst public spending disasters since devolution.

Who messed up? Who knows, in the Scottish National Party's secret Scotland—because all the evidence is gone? Audit Scotland could not get to the bottom of a number of points. The only scraps of paper that we have left on the disastrous decision are the old SNP press releases that claimed that they were saving Scottish shipbuilding.

When the First Minister visited the ferries in 2016, were the painted-on windows not a sign that her decision was an absolute shocker?

**The First Minister:** What Douglas Ross has demonstrated is that he has not spent much time reading the hundreds of pages of documents that are in the public domain. There is one issue in relation to which Audit Scotland refers to a lack of documentation. That is a matter that the Government needs to reflect on seriously and well. However, there are hundreds of pages of documents. I have referred to many of them already, and I think that they would bear some attention being paid to them by Douglas Ross.

I said candidly at the outset that I think that the situation is deeply regrettable.

When I visited the yard it was, of course, in private ownership, and assurances were given about the completion of work. The problems that have led to cost overruns, delays and—worst of all—a negative impact on our island communities, are deeply regrettable. At every step, the motivation of the Government has been to secure employment and the shipyard, and to get the ferries completed. That is what we will continue to focus on. We will learn the lessons in the Audit Scotland report and we will make sure that all its recommendations are taken forward.

Douglas Ross might think that it is unimportant that we have saved 300 jobs and a shipyard, but I think that those things matter, which is why we will now focus on making sure that the yard has a positive future.

### Spring Statement 2022 (Cost of Living)

**2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** As other members have done, I pay tribute to David Hill. I send my particular condolences to his family and friends and I recognise the wonderful tribute that Jamie Greene, who employed him, paid to David. I send my condolences to Jamie Greene and, in particular, to all our Conservative colleagues in the Parliament. David was respected across the political spectrum and he had friends not just among MSPs but among the many staff who work in and around the Parliament building.

Yesterday, faced with the biggest fall in living standards since rationing, the Chancellor of the Exchequer failed to present a spring statement that would make life easier for millions of families. He failed to introduce a windfall tax, he failed to put more money in people's pockets and he raised the tax burden on millions of families across the United Kingdom.

He must have been taking lessons on missed opportunities from the First Minister. In her Government's budget, the First Minister had the opportunity to tackle the cost of living crisis but, just like the Tories, her Government failed to do so. Copying Rishi Sunak's policy, by giving households less than £4 a week in a council tax rebate, will not cut it. Will the First Minister accept that the actions that she has taken so far are not enough to confront the crisis?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** In the Scottish Government's budget, we doubled the Scottish child payment, which is game changing for families with children who are living in poverty. If memory serves me correctly, the Labour Party shamefully voted against that measure in the Scottish budget.

Yesterday's spring statement showed a callous disregard for the misery that people are already facing and that will only get much worse.

Household incomes are about to suffer their biggest fall in more than 60 years. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that an additional 1.3 million people across the UK, including half a million children, will be pushed into poverty. There was nothing in the spring statement to help the poor and those on the lowest incomes, which I think was shameful.

The most shameful thing about the chancellor's announcements yesterday is that he squirreled away money for pre-election bribes. That money could be spent right now to help those who are in desperate circumstances. His actions yesterday in that regard were disgusting.

With regard to the Scottish Government's actions, we have limited powers and resources but, due to our wider long-standing policies, people here already pay less, on average, in council tax, water bills and rail fares. Unlike people who live south of the border, people in Scotland pay nothing for prescriptions, eye tests or university tuition. In addition to the £150 payment through council tax, we have decided to uprate devolved benefits by 6 per cent. The failure to do so south of the border is having the biggest impact on low-income families.

As I have already said, we have introduced the Scottish child payment, we are investing in the Scottish welfare fund and we are increasing the fuel insecurity fund. We will continue to do everything that we can within our powers and resources, but anybody who is serious about helping the lowest paid would be arguing and demanding that powers and resources be taken out of the hands of Rishi Sunak and his type and put into the hands of this Parliament.

**Anas Sarwar:** We welcome the doubling of the Scottish child payment, but that plan predates the cost of living crisis. More than 270,000 children will not benefit from it, and poverty campaigners say that it needs to go further. The First Minister wants to obsess about powers that she does not have, but she has been in power for 15 years, so she has power and she should use it to change people's lives, because that is what the job is for.

Let us look at what she has done with the powers that she has. She has copied Rishi Sunak's council tax rebate, failed to target support to those who are most in need, increased rail fares and put up water charges for Scottish households. We have published detailed plans on how to confront the cost of living crisis but, so far, the Scottish National Party has not listened.

Here is another meaningful action that the Government can take: Scottish Water, which is owned by the Scottish Government, is currently sitting on a cash mountain of £428 million, so Scottish Labour is calling not just for the freezing

of water charges but for a £100 rebate for every household in Scotland. Does the First Minister believe that that money is better off in Scottish Water's bank account or in struggling families' accounts?

**The First Minister:** We will consider everything that we can reasonably do to help. Anas Sarwar said that the doubling of the Scottish child payment predated the cost of living crisis. That is, of course, one reason why, this very afternoon in the Parliament, Shona Robison will deliver a statement accompanying our updated tackling child poverty delivery plan, setting out the further action that the Government will take to lift children out of poverty, rather than putting more children into poverty, as the United Kingdom Government is doing. I am surprised that Anas Sarwar did not know that.

Yes, my party has been in government for some time, which is why people in Scotland do not pay for prescriptions or eye tests, or to go to university. It is why we have, on average, lower council tax than England and Labour-run Wales have. It is why more people pay no council tax at all, because we retained the council tax reduction scheme. We are using our powers, and the doubling of the Scottish child payment is the principal example of that.

We will continue to look at what more we can do. Anas Sarwar is right to continue to press us to do more, but he would have more credibility if he did not also back the retention of the powers over welfare and public spending that are in the hands of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak. Until he changes that position, I do not know whether many people in Scotland will take him seriously.

**Anas Sarwar:** That is simply not good enough. People are struggling right now and, as per usual, the First Minister wants to make this a constitutional debate. I hate to break it to her but, see whether people voted yes or no, their bills are still going up and they need help from the Government. The First Minister should take action to tackle the cost of living crisis.

Let us look at the tragic stories from across the country over the past week. We have heard about people stealing fuel canisters in the Highlands; families turning down fresh vegetables from food banks because they cannot afford to turn on the gas cooker; and people digging up their gardens to grow their own food because they cannot afford to buy it.

That is why Labour has set out the actions that both Governments should take: a windfall tax on oil and gas giants to reduce bills by £600; the £200 as a grant, not a loan; and, here in Scotland, a £400 support payment for struggling families; a £100 rebate on water bills; and a freeze on water

charges and rail fares. That is real help. It is supporting families with more than £1,000, in contrast to the Government's flagship cost of living policy, which would give families less than £4 a week. When will the First Minister understand that she has to do better than that?

**The First Minister:** Our flagship policy is the Scottish child payment, which, of course, Anas Sarwar and his colleagues voted against when the budget came before the Parliament.

We will continue to look at everything and anything that we can do within the powers and resources that we have. Shona Robison will set out further actions when she delivers her statement this afternoon. There is real misery—a wave of human misery—being experienced right now, which will only get worse. On that, Anas Sarwar and I do not disagree, and we will continue to do everything that we can.

However, I am afraid that there is a real issue at the heart of this. If members look at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysis that was published this morning, they will see that those in the lowest income decile will see their household incomes cut by almost 6 per cent. The main reason for that is the failure to uprate benefits by more than 3.1 per cent. Where we have control of benefits here, we have uprated them by 6 per cent.

The reason why we cannot do that for the main benefits such as universal credit is that we do not have the power. The reason why we cannot impose a windfall tax to help with energy costs and why energy costs remain reserved is because, when it came to a choice between yes and no, Anas Sarwar encouraged people to vote no, and because people voted no, those powers remain in the hands of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak. Until Anas Sarwar addresses that issue, we in this Parliament will always be limited in what we can do. When will he wake up and realise that?

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** We move to supplementary questions.

#### **Historical Forced Adoption (Consultation)**

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** A constituent of mine is a victim of historical forced adoption and is concerned about confidentially of victims who are responding to the Scottish Government consultation. She explains that filling in the responses is quite difficult for victims, as it brings up a lot of emotion and has a big impact on people filling it in. That could have a significant impact on the responses given and the effectiveness of the consultation.

What assurances can the First Minister give my constituent and all victims of forced adoption that any information that they give will be treated

confidentially and that they will not be identifiable from their responses?

**The First Minister:** That is a really important issue. I recognise that it is also an extremely sensitive issue, so I thank everybody who has responded to the consultation so far. I appreciate that it takes a lot of courage to share deeply distressing stories such as that.

We are offering a private space for people to come forward to share experiences in complete confidentiality. I reassure the member's constituent that participants can take part entirely anonymously and that no data that could identify an individual will be retained.

We also have a dedicated helpline, in collaboration with Health in Mind, to provide interim support to individuals who want to make a contribution. The closing date for responses is 20 April. Following that date, all responses will be analysed and considered, along with any other available evidence.

### **Murray Royal Hospital**

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Over the past decade, no fewer than four women have died while patients on the Moredun ward at Murray royal hospital in Perth, while suffering acute mental health disorders. Today, *The Courier* reports that a fifth patient died on the ward in the same period, but their death and the circumstances have never been made public.

Those patients were in hospital to keep them free from harm, but they and their families have been failed. Why is that happening and what is being done to stop it?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Those are very serious issues, and where lessons need to be learned, they are learned by health boards and, where necessary, by the Government. I am not aware of the detail of the case reported in *The Courier* today. I will ensure that I become aware of that detail and, when I have had the opportunity to do so, I am happy to write to Murdo Fraser.

### **Hourglass**

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** Hourglass is a 24/7 helpline supporting older people and their families dealing with abuse and neglect. It is the first service of its kind in Scotland and it has just launched, as a result of a 46 per cent rise in elder abuse calls during the pandemic. Elder abuse is an undersupported and underreported area. Given that shocking statistic, the Hourglass helpline will be a very welcome resource.

Hourglass is funded by the Home Office to provide a service in England. Will the First Minister

agree to meet Hourglass and consider providing support for that valuable service in Scotland?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Services such as Hourglass are very important. Elder abuse is awful, and the pressures of the pandemic are understood by all of us. I am happy to have the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care meet or talk to Hourglass, to see what the Scottish Government can do to support it.

### **Displaced People (Support)**

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** My constituent's family have, thankfully, made it safely to Glasgow from Kyiv, including a 68-year-old relative travelling on a Ukrainian passport. They have asked me whether their relative will qualify for the concessionary travel scheme—I hope that the First Minister can confirm that.

More widely, though, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to assist those arriving in Scotland from Ukraine, or indeed elsewhere, to access all the services and entitlements that they should have the right to receive at such a difficult time?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I am relieved and pleased to hear that Bob Doris's constituent's family have made it safely to Glasgow. I know that they will receive a warm welcome here. I would be happy to provide any detailed information on the support services that are available, given their particular circumstances. We have a proud history of welcoming displaced people and a wealth of experience from previous schemes.

We are working with a range of partners to ensure that wraparound support is in place for all displaced people who arrive here in Scotland. Those who come from Ukraine will have a right to work, and access to social security benefits and public funds. We will be working to make sure that people are aware of that and get access to all those services.

We are standing ready to welcome—I hope—significant numbers of people fleeing the situation in Ukraine. We are pleased that the supersponsor scheme that we proposed to the UK Government went live on Friday. We have multi-agency efforts in place to provide support. We now need to see visas begin to be granted in significant numbers so that we can get more people to Scotland and give them the support that they need.

On that issue, let me take the opportunity to welcome—on behalf of all of us, I am sure—the Dnipro Kids children, who arrived in Scotland last night. I know that they would all rather be at home in Ukraine but, while they are here, all of us would

want to ensure that they are surrounded by love, care and support.

### **Child Protection (Local Authorities)**

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Meghan Gallacher.

Is your card in, Ms Gallacher? Bear with us for a second. There you go.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor on North Lanarkshire Council.

On 24 February, the First Minister gave a commitment to explore Christine Grahame's suggestion that local authorities should not investigate their own complaints in cases relating to child protection. Does the First Minister agree that an independent national whistleblowing officer should be established for public bodies, and does she agree that those who cover up child protection issues should be reported to Police Scotland immediately?

**The First Minister:** As the member rightly says, I gave a commitment to Christine Grahame a few weeks ago. I hope that she accepts that consideration of those issues is still under way. I will make sure that, as part of that consideration, the proposals that she has made today are properly considered.

### **Domestic Abuse (Reoffending)**

3. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that perpetrators of domestic abuse do not go on to reoffend. (S6F-00948)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Domestic abuse is an insidious and dreadful crime. It has a devastating impact on victims, and it is vital that perpetrators are fully held to account. In partnership with key stakeholders, we are implementing equally safe, which is Scotland's strategy to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls. It aims to prevent violence from occurring in the first place, to build the capability and capacity of mainstream and specialist services to support survivors and those at risk, and to strengthen the justice response to victims and perpetrators.

As a tangible example of that, we have committed to expanding the availability of the accredited Caledonian system, to ensure that more male perpetrators of domestic abuse are directed to services that challenge harmful behaviours, to reduce reoffending and to improve the lives of women and children.

**Pam Gosal:** As a very young child, I watched victims of domestic abuse come to my mum's shop on Argyle Street for help. Not enough has changed. Half of the 65,000 domestic violence incidents reported in 2020-21 were committed by reoffenders. It is clear that whatever the Government is doing is not working. We need to work together to provide a true deterrent for this horrible abuse. Will the First Minister's Government commit to doing more on the issue and back my proposal to create a domestic abuse register?

**The First Minister:** These are serious issues, and I want to ensure that we take them very seriously. On the specific issue of an offender register, we keep the law under continual review. We are always keen and willing to explore any options to reduce crime and reoffending, so we would be very keen to understand the detail of that proposal and give it due consideration. All registered sex offenders are already placed on the sex offender register and, as such, must register with the police as part of those requirements. However, I appreciate that that does not include all perpetrators of domestic violence. The issues need careful consideration, and I certainly undertake to give them that.

On the broader issues, it is definitely the case—and it should be welcomed—that more people feel able to come forward when they are victims of domestic abuse or sexual violence. That is to be encouraged. However, sentences for perpetrators are obviously a matter for the courts, and it is important that we all recognise that. A range of work is under way to ensure that there is better support for victims and that those who commit these dreadful crimes face up to the consequences of their actions. The Caledonian system that I referred to is an important part of that. We are also investing more in the support services that victims need and get so much benefit from. A range of work is under way, but the Government will remain open minded to any further proposals that are put forward on the issue.

### **Refugees (Ukraine)**

4. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what work is being done to extend the "warm Scots welcome" to Ukrainians arriving in the United Kingdom. (S6F-00947)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** We all continue to be horrified by the illegal war in Ukraine, and we are ready to extend the warmest of Scottish welcomes to those who are fleeing the war. We have been working rapidly with a range of partners to ensure that displaced Ukrainians arrive to a place of safety and security. We have established welcome hubs at key entry points, to

support people with what they need immediately on arrival and to assess their medium to longer-term needs.

We are working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to provide accommodation, as well as exploring all viable public and private sector housing options and, of course, offers from members of the public who have generously offered to open their own homes.

**Fulton MacGregor:** I thank the First Minister for the Scottish Government's on-going work in the area. I also congratulate my good friend and colleague Neil Gray on his recent appointment as the minister for Ukrainian refugees. It is a fitting appointment. Our two constituencies, which make up the wider Monklands area, have a rich shared history, and we have both been deeply touched in recent weeks by the magnitude of the response of people in Coatbridge and Chryston and Airdrie and Shotts to the crisis and their tremendous willingness to support those who are seeking refuge. How will the Scottish Government ensure that the welcome hubs that she mentioned support displaced people from Ukraine to find peace and safety in Scotland after the stress and trauma of escaping from an illegal war?

**The First Minister:** The welcome hubs are a really important initial part of what we want to offer. They will assess immediate needs, take a multi-agency approach and provide wraparound support. That will include having trained staff on call to support people who are experiencing trauma. The welcome hubs will also be able to begin the assessment of longer-term needs, including accommodation requirements.

We now have the supersponsor route in place. That is in addition to the homes for Ukraine route and, of course, the family route. We have the support ready to be provided here. The bit in the middle is getting the visa applications granted so that people can start to arrive in numbers.

I will get an update later today, but the update that I had yesterday was that more than 1,000 applications had been made through the supersponsor scheme, and there had been just under 1,000 individual matching applications, I think. Obviously, we are still improving data flows, so there will be some uncertainty around those figures. However, we need to see a significant speeding up of the granting of those applications in order that people can come here and start to access the support that we have ready for them on that multi-agency basis.

#### **National Health Service (Dentistry)**

**5. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that people are

able to register with national health service dental practices and receive NHS dental treatments in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6F-00929)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** It is a priority to ensure that patients are able to access NHS dental care. We have committed to abolishing dental charges in the lifetime of this Parliament, and that will help to remove at least one of the barriers to accessing high-quality NHS dental services.

To support patient care and access, we recently announced revised payment arrangements for dentists from 1 April that will more closely link payments to the number of patients seen and treatments provided. That multiplier funding arrangement will see additional investment in dentistry increase by almost £17 million in the first quarter of the new financial year. That comes on top of the 9 per cent planned increase in the budget for NHS dental services in the coming financial year and the support that has been given during the pandemic of £50 million in financial support for the sector and a further £35 million for personal protective equipment.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** Many constituents have told me that, due to the total lack of NHS provision in their areas, they have been left with untreated dental pain and conditions and that they often miss check-ups that could spot life-threatening conditions such as oral cancer. Does the First Minister realise that she is increasingly overseeing not even a two-tier system, because, for many people in Scotland, dentistry is effectively privatised already?

**The First Minister:** No. We continue to support NHS dentistry. In fact, we are investing around 40 per cent more, proportionately, than is being invested south of the border, as we have around 40 per cent more dentists per 100,000 of the population than there are elsewhere in the United Kingdom. There are significant challenges because of the pandemic. That is why we have financially supported dentists during the pandemic, and it is why we are taking action now to further support dentists.

The multiplier funding arrangement that I referred to in my earlier answer is extremely important, and it has been welcomed by many dentists. I think that the British Dental Association has also welcomed its introduction. That arrangement recognises the importance of linking payments to the number of patients and the treatments that are being provided.

We will continue to support NHS dentistry and ensure that people have access to it. As I said, removing dental charges will also take away one of the barriers that, traditionally, some people have experienced.



**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** I had my own experience with dental problems last week. I do not directly blame the First Minister for that.

Douglas Thain from the Scottish Dental Association said that decades of underfunding by the Scottish Government has created a toxic environment as dentists battle rising costs and inadequate fees paid by health boards. Does the First Minister not see that her current approach endangers dental provision for the people who need it most?

**The First Minister:** I said earlier that the buck stops with me, but I am afraid that that does not include Stephen Kerr's teeth problems. I just hope that the glue is working better today. I will move on, because the issues are too important for such levity.

The issues are important, and there are more dentists here. If I look at where Stephen Kerr's party is in government, I see that the number of dentists per 100,000 of the population is 39.9. In Scotland, it is 55.6, which is 40 per cent higher. For this financial year, our Government's investment in core community dental services is 40 per cent higher.

That does not remove all the difficulties, but it shows the foundation that we have in place in Scotland, which is why the additional investment that I am speaking about is so important. It recognises the additional problems that are caused by the pandemic. We will continue to focus on supporting NHS dentists in order that people across the country can have the access to them that they have every right to expect.

### Spring Statement 2022

**6. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the spring statement. (S6F-00950)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Yesterday's spring statement was a missed opportunity on the part of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to give families and businesses the support that they need now in the face of rising costs. It showed a callous disregard for the poorest in our society. Despite the largest annual fall in living standards since the 1950s, as confirmed by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the chancellor's decisions will mainly assist the better-off and will provide no real help to those on low incomes, with ever more households left facing poverty. In contrast, within our very limited powers and resources in this regard, the Scottish Government is taking a range of targeted steps, including, of course, doubling the Scottish child payment, uprating our devolved social security

benefits by 6 per cent and extending our fuel insecurity fund.

**Ariane Burgess:** Brexit and the volatile cost of oil and gas are playing a massive role in the cost of living crisis, but there was no recognition of that Tory legacy in the chancellor's statement. What is worse is that there was nothing in his statement to help those who are struggling the most with rising costs. With the Office for Budget Responsibility warning about the biggest annual fall in living standards since records began, what can the Scottish Government do to build on what we have already delivered to tackle the cost of living, such as free bus travel for young people, free school meals for primary school children and, as the First Minister has just said, doubling the Scottish child payment?

**The First Minister:** It is absolutely right to point out the impact of the chancellor's statement yesterday on the poorest in our society. This morning, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published analysis that I recommend every member of the Parliament look at carefully. Those in the richest decile will see their incomes fall by less than 2 per cent, while those in the poorest decile will see their incomes fall by almost 6 per cent. That is principally down to the failure to properly uprate benefits. Given the fact that the chancellor had access to more money, the decision not to do that is disgusting and completely indefensible.

I have already set out the actions that the Scottish Government is taking, and we will continue to look at further actions that we can take. Indeed, as I said earlier, in the statement on the tackling child poverty delivery plan that she will deliver later, Shona Robison will set out further actions that the Scottish Government will take.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Given the woefully inadequate spring statement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the face of a fierce cost of living hike, does the First Minister agree that for people on fixed incomes such as pensioners, many of whom became housebound in these Covid years, heating costs will be devastating, with the United Kingdom state pension being the worst in Europe? Does she also agree that Anas Sarwar, for example, must wake up to the position that, without power over pensions and other benefits, mitigation has its limitations?

**The First Minister:** Christine Grahame is absolutely 100 per cent right: we cannot use powers that we do not hold in this Parliament. Where we do hold powers, we are using them, so we are taking game-changing action to lift children out of poverty.

We do not have control over pensions. We tend to talk about the invidious choices that, in these circumstances, people face between eating or heating their homes. In the face of this cost of living crisis, there will be some people who cannot afford to do either. That is the reality.

This Government will do everything that we can with the powers and resources that we have, but as long as so many of those levers lie with a Conservative Government at Westminster, we are going to see more of what we saw in the spring statement yesterday. Anybody who really cares about these issues would be not just arguing for those powers to be taken away from Rishi Sunak and Boris Johnson and put into the hands of this Parliament as quickly as possible, but demanding that it happen.

### **Wealth Tax**

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Millions of workers are facing a cost of living crisis that they did not create. The People's Assembly has been organising mass demonstrations up and down the country to make it clear that workers cannot pay—and will not pay—for the crisis. Campaigners are calling for the introduction of a wealth tax on the richest 1 per cent, which would raise £14 billion a year for tackling the cost of living crisis and investing in public services. Does the First Minister back that call?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I think that we should see those who can afford it contribute the most. However, a wealth tax, like a windfall tax, is not something that this Government has the power to put in place. If Labour wants these things to happen in Scotland, it cannot just talk about the ends that it wants to see—it has to actually equip this Parliament and this Government with the means to do something about it. That is what is called making this Parliament independent.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take a general supplementary from Liam McArthur.

### **Islands Connectivity Plan (Internal Ferry Services)**

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** The Scottish Government has informed Orkney Islands Council that the islands connectivity plan will exclude lifeline internal ferry services in both Orkney and Shetland. Can the First Minister explain why her national islands plan does not appear to include the needs of all Scotland's islands?

**The First Minister:** We have been discussing with the island authorities for some time the interisland ferry services, and we will continue to do that. I will ask the Minister for Transport to

engage with Liam McArthur in more detail on what further steps we are able to take.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes First Minister's questions.

## World Tuberculosis Day 2022

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02874, in the name of Miles Briggs, on world tuberculosis day 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons or place an R in the chat box as soon as possible.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes that 24 March 2022 marks World Tuberculosis Day; understands that tuberculosis (TB) remains one of the world's deadliest infectious diseases, killing 1.5 million people each year; believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed decades of positive progress in tackling TB; understands that there has been uneven progress in the delivery of the commitments made at the UN High-Level Meeting on TB, including efforts to diagnose and treat 40 million people with TB by 2022 and to dramatically increase investments in research; considers that TB is a disease of poverty, with the most vulnerable and marginalised at greatest risk of both TB and drug-resistant TB, including in Scotland; believes that strong international health systems are vital for securing the UK's domestic health security; recognises what it sees as the importance of the upcoming seventh replenishment of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in tackling global TB, and notes what it sees as the vital work carried out by clinical staff, scientists and civil society organisations across Scotland and globally to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goal of ending TB by 2030.

12:49

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** I am grateful to be able to bring the debate to the chamber today, and I thank members from across the Parliament for all their support on what is not only an important public health issue globally but, increasingly, a potential threat to domestic health security.

I pay tribute to the Edinburgh group of Results UK, which campaigns on international development issues, including tuberculosis. I have been working with the group since my election to Parliament in 2016, and I am pleased to welcome some of its members to the public gallery today. I have also sponsored a stand just outside the chamber, and I know that a number of members have already spoken to and engaged with the group. If they have not done so already, there may be a chance after the debate for them to speak to the group and find out more information.

I also take the opportunity to note the contribution made by two leading professionals in Scotland. Dr Helen Stagg of the centre for population health sciences at the University of Edinburgh was, until recently, chair of the UKAPT. For those who do not know what that is, it stands for UK Academics and Professionals to

End TB. Susan Duthie, who is the lead TB specialist nurse at NHS Grampian, also led on drawing up recommendations on the management of Afghan national TB screening in Scotland.

I also put on record our thanks for all the vital work that is carried out by clinical staff, scientists and civil society organisations, in Scotland and globally, to deliver on the sustainable development goal, which we all signed up to, of ending TB by 2030.

Tuberculosis is an incredibly infectious disease that is spread through coughing. It has killed more people than any other single infectious agent in history, including SARS-CoV-2. TB is curable, but people need support to get through the many months of treatment that are required.

As noted in the motion, around 1.5 million people die from TB every year and many millions more are diagnosed with the disease. That is a shocking statistic and something that we all need to reflect on. Presiding Officer, if you were a teenager before 2005—I am not sure whether you were—you may bear a small, circular scar on your bicep. That is by-product of immunisation against TB and a reminder of the prevalence of the disease in this country at one time.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic and its widespread effects on diagnosis and treatment have brought the disease of TB back to the forefront of the policy debate, especially in the context of public health in developing countries. Because of the similarities between TB and Covid, much of the precautionary equipment and many of the treatment centres and services that are usually the first line of defence for the former were refocused on the latter. The World Health Organization has suggested that the pandemic has set back efforts to end TB globally by more than a decade.

Researchers at the University of Dundee, who received a £3.8 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop treatments, have warned that the impact of the pandemic could lead to a rise in tuberculosis infections around the world, as some patients will have gone undiagnosed amid the pandemic. Indeed, as with many services across our health landscape, we believe that diagnoses of TB dropped by around 20 per cent in 2020, as access to treatment became increasingly difficult.

Some projections suggest that progress against TB has also been significantly set back. Dr Laura Cleghorn of the University of Dundee said that there is a "pressing need" to develop new treatments for the illness, which some people wrongly think of as a "disease of yesteryear". I agree. As I said earlier, it is a concern that, across the world, diagnoses of TB dropped by a similar

level, with 16 countries accounting for 93 per cent of that drop. That suggests that countries that already have a higher burden of disease have fared far worse.

Of course, other issues have led to that protracted problem. For example, fewer people have been tested for TB and the number attending for tests has reduced. That might be due to people's fear of contracting Covid-19 in hospital or because people with Covid-19 were not able to go to hospital. As we emerge from the pandemic, we urgently need to tackle that problem. Otherwise, we risk stepping backwards in the fight against deaths from TB.

That will, of course, require a sincere, co-ordinated and multilateral effort, but if the pandemic has demonstrated anything it is that immense benefit can sometimes be gained from proper and targeted investment in global public health. In recent years, concerted action has been taken to tackle TB and we need to see that work being recovered.

In 2018, for example, we saw the first high-level global meeting on TB. It produced a declaration of political will that can shape our approach going forward. Notably, it identified work to close the research and development funding gap. To date, that has been estimated to be more than \$1.1 billion. I welcome the £20 million of UK Government research and development funding. A good portion of that has already been targeted towards such global health innovations.

There are still many concerns around research and development, and I hope that we can address those globally.

The first and most obvious concern is about treatment methods. Innovation will allow us to simplify treatment regimes, allowing them to be more easily deployed in all corners of the world, in contrast to what are currently lengthy and complex treatments for many patients that can often take more than three months.

Similarly, we need to see progress on diagnosis of TB. We need to be able to do it in a speedy, efficient and simple way. To circle back to my earlier points, Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst to the diagnosis question, and I hope that we will see investment around early diagnosis of TB, as we have seen around Covid.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to fund the research that will look at drug resistance. We are all acutely aware of a really worrying trend—a rise in drug-resistant or multidrug-resistant TB. More than 160,000 cases were recorded people last year alone, which is deeply concerning for global public health.

We know that Scotland is also behind in funding for latent TB screening in communities at risk and vulnerable to TB. I hope that the minister who closes the debate can outline the public health initiatives that are being developed to address those concerns around latent TB screening.

To conclude, I am incredibly grateful to members for allowing me to introduce the debate today, and for the opportunity to discuss these issues of public health policy around the world and of domestic health security.

Above all, I hope that today can present an opportunity for Parliament to re-affirm our collective mission and that of clinical staff, scientists and civil society organisations in Scotland and globally to meet the sustainable development goal of ending TB by 2030.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Briggs. We now move to the open debate.

12:57

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and congratulate Miles Briggs on securing it. I apologise for not being in the chamber today.

Miles Briggs has laid out very well the importance of world tuberculosis day 2022, which this year marks the theme "Invest to End TB. Save Lives". Raising awareness is one of the asks in the briefing from Results UK. I met its staff in Parliament on Tuesday at their stand, which Miles Briggs sponsors. It is important to raise public awareness about the devastating health, social and economic consequences of TB and to highlight the efforts that are being made to end the global epidemic.

When preparing for the debate, I reflected on Scotland's journey to tackle TB. In 1948, TB was killing one person every two hours in Scotland. Back then, Scotland was virtually the only country in Europe where new cases of TB were continuing to rise unchecked. Although forever the disease of poverty and crowded slums, wealth provided no barrier. Young men and women were particularly at risk and TB meningitis was certain death for babies and toddlers. TB patients could spend a year or more recovering and resting in a sanatorium, including at Lochmaben sanatorium near Dumfries.

One of my first tutors in nursing college—Mr David Shankland—was the first male nurse in Dumfries and Galloway, at Lochmaben hospital. Davie taught me and my colleagues so much about his time at Lochmaben, helping support people who were recovering from TB. It was a dreadful time back then, which the appalling stigma that was attached to TB made worse.

Streptomycin—the first treatment and first real cure—came along, developed by William Feldman, a Glasgow-born vet who helped refine it into a medical form at the Mayo clinic in Minnesota.

I want to pay tribute, too, to Sir John Crofton for developing the first combined antibiotic multidose regimen that still forms the basis of TB treatments today, and to the University of St Andrews, the University of Edinburgh and Queen Margaret University, which continue Sir John's legacy today, working across continents and disciplines.

The drugs were game changing and, since then, largely down to our fantastic NHS and vaccination efforts, the situation here has improved.

However, Scotland's example has not been replicated around the world. According to the World Health Organization's "Global tuberculosis report", 60 per cent of global TB cases come from just six countries, where health inequalities are more prevalent. Those countries are China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan and South Africa.

Although treatments are available across those nations, the problem is largely that, even though doctors routinely advise patients with TB about the importance of following prescribed regimens, many people do not complete their treatment plan. When patients stop taking TB medication, they risk developing multidrug-resistant TB, which is even more difficult and costly to treat. In 2016, the median cost of treating a single patient with multidrug-resistant TB in a developing country was \$9,529, and treatment could last up to two years. New multidrug regimens of nine to 12 months exist, but they can cost up to \$1,000 per person, and maintaining patient compliance for such a long period presents additional challenges. It is not that patients do not care about their health but that they are burdened by economic constraints.

TB may be caused by a stubborn bacterium, which primarily affects the lungs. It is similar to our SARS-CoV-2 virus in its high transmissibility, but it is poverty that sustains it. Treatment often means travelling long distances to clinics and giving up a day's wage. Donor agencies and international health organisations often ignore the context for why people act the way they do.

We must work on ways in which to support and invest in treatment. I am interested in exploring the possibility of conditional cash transfers, which have been used in recent years in medical interventions around the globe. They are forms of social assistance programmes that aim to reduce poverty. Apart from providing extra income, conditional cash transfers allow patients to invest in their health through providing the means to access basic health services or to send their children to school, which helps to break

intergenerational poverty cycles. I am interested in hearing the Scottish Government's position on CCTs and whether any of our international relief funds support them.

As this year's theme is "Invest to End TB. Save Lives", perhaps CCTs are a way to invest to do just that.

13:02

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I thank Miles Briggs for lodging his motion and the words that it contains. If there were to be a vote on it, I would vote for it.

Today is world tuberculosis day, and this week started with world poetry day. In the opening lines of "On the page", by the late Tom Leonard, he said:

"The local is the international,  
The national is the parochial".

This national Parliament is nothing if it does not look beyond the parochial, if it does not see its place in the world and if we do not understand that we are world citizens with global horizons, neither limited by passports nor narrowed by where we happen to have been born. This debate is about our common humanity.

Tuberculosis is an old disease. Many of us have family experience of the toll that it takes. Growing up in Leeds, my grandfather lost two older brothers and a sister, Florence, and then, one by one, both his parents to this deadly disease of poverty. Tuberculosis is the reason why John Wheatley, as a Glasgow Labour councillor, strove for not just slum clearance but good-quality council houses that were, in his words, "homes not hutches". Yet, in 2020, more than 100 years later, 1.5 million people died of this preventable, curable disease.

I am bound to say that, if we invested as much in the machinery of peace as we do in the machinery of war, and if we invested as much in saving lives as we do in endangering them, the world would be a far better place. In 2020, the year when the number of TB deaths went up again, world military expenditure in that one year was \$1.781 trillion. By comparison, just \$5.3 billion dollars were invested in universal access to TB prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care across the globe. That is a ratio of 370 to 1. Healthcare is a human right.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful to Richard Leonard for giving way, as he is giving a particularly passionate speech, which I agree with. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Global Fund and the work that it does across the world, especially in Africa? I have seen at first

hand the work that has been done because of the Global Fund.

Will he also acknowledge the important funders of the Global Fund, such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom?

**Richard Leonard:** We need to be internationalist in outlook and, as I said in my opening remarks, we need to understand that we are citizens of the world and have a global responsibility in this respect.

Healthcare is a human right, but to be poor in this world is to be too often denied that human right. That is why the director general of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, recently said:

“The struggle to end TB is not just a struggle against a single disease. It’s also the struggle to end poverty, inequity, unsafe housing, discrimination and stigma, and to extend social protection and universal health coverage.”

The unnecessary deaths of 1.5 million people a year do not just tell us where poverty lies; they tell us where power lies: between the global north and the global south; between rich and poor; and between the profits of corporations and the lives of people.

The WHO has accused big pharmaceutical giants of, in its words, “exiting the field” of investment in new antibiotics to deal with drug resistance, which is a major cause of TB death. As far back as 2014, AstraZeneca withdrew all early-stage research and development for TB, malaria and neglected tropical diseases. The biggest pharmaceutical corporation in the world, Johnson & Johnson, deliberately charged developing countries eight times the cost price of manufacture for the newer TB drug bedaquiline, before a campaign by Médecins Sans Frontières pressured the company to cut the price, but that was its first instinct. For big pharma, it is not about the drugs with the greatest clinical or humanitarian value; it is always about the drugs with the greatest monetary and shareholder value.

Tuberculosis is a disease of poverty, of inequality and of global power and global priorities, so our job is to build a world where people have clean water and safe shelter, where no one lives in fear of starvation, and where no one dies from a disease for which a vaccine has existed for almost a century. That is the future that we need to build: a better, just, more humane world—a future of hope, a future of peace and, I hope, a future of socialism.

13:08

**The Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport (Maree Todd):** On behalf of the Scottish Government, I thank Miles Briggs for

bringing the motion to the chamber on world tuberculosis day.

My heart goes out to all those across the world who have been affected by this terrible disease. Too many lives have been lost to TB here in Scotland and around the globe, and we cannot let that continue. TB is a disease that, in the majority of cases, is treatable and curable. We must keep making progress towards the end of this epidemic.

With that in mind, I acknowledge the work that is being done across the world to support the WHO’s end TB strategy and the United Nations sustainable development goals. I also highlight the fantastic work being done by the Global Fund, a partnership endorsed by the G8 that was developed to accelerate the end of TB, AIDS and malaria as epidemics. In 2020 alone, the Global Fund facilitated the treatment of 4.7 million people with TB. Since its inception in 2002, there has been a 28 per cent reduction in the number of TB deaths, excluding HIV-positive cases, in the countries in which the Global Fund operates. Although it is undoubtedly the case that there is still more to be done, we should all be incredibly proud of the strides that have been taken to reduce the impact of TB across the world.

Closer to home, I want to touch on the work that is being done here in Scotland. As a Government, we take tuberculosis very seriously: we are fully committed to eradicating the disease in Scotland. For more than 20 years, we have monitored the disease through the enhanced surveillance of mycobacterial infections scheme, which ensures that we have access to up-to-date data on case numbers, treatment, outcomes and drug resistance patterns.

In 2011, the Scottish Government published “A TB Action Plan for Scotland”, which set out key recommendations on TB care and control. In the years since the publication of that plan, there has been a sustained reduction in the number of TB cases across Scotland. Case levels remain well within the target of less than 10 cases per 100,000 people that is set in the World Health Organization’s end TB strategy.

However, as a Government, we know that we cannot become complacent. We must acknowledge that, as the numbers fall, TB cases in Scotland are becoming more complex. The patients we are seeing are often from underserved population groups. They might not have been born in the UK or they might be infected with a drug-resistant strain of the infection. To address the complexity of the TB landscape, the Scottish health protection network established a TB multidisciplinary network, which brings together experts from across the country.

In 2017, the network published “TB Framework for Scotland”, which was built on the foundations of the TB action plan. It set out an approach of supporting progress towards key TB outcomes, including a reduction in the health inequalities gap that affects those who are diagnosed with TB.

The Covid-19 pandemic put the brakes on much of the good work on TB in Scotland, as vital resources were redirected. I am happy to report that meetings of the implementation group have now recommenced, and I am confident that good progress will be made towards the outcomes that have been identified.

In addition, a reference service for whole-genome sequencing of TB is now live in Scotland. That service will allow the NHS to much more rapidly predict resistance to anti-TB drugs and to assess strains to allow better investigation into clusters of the disease.

To respond to Miles Briggs’s specific point, we acknowledge the issues around latent TB screening. We are actively working with multiple partners to understand what more can be done in that area. I am waiting for a paper on exactly that issue—I expect it to be with me quite soon.

Although there is more work to be done here in Scotland, I am proud of what we have achieved so far. However, as is the case in every health debate, we must acknowledge the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the fight against TB, not just here but further afield. Across the globe, every area of healthcare has been impacted by the pandemic, and TB is no exception. There has been a reduction in testing; essential resources such as labs and healthcare workers have been diverted to fight Covid-19; and there have been significant declines in the number of TB cases that have been successfully treated.

Despite that, there is hope. Emergency funding from the Global Fund is helping countries to fight TB alongside Covid-19. Investment in health workers and in tools and systems to combat airborne diseases is increasing.

The challenge is huge. We must remember that we are emerging from a pandemic that has taken a massive toll on our communities, our people and our health services, but I know that, if we harness the collective purpose that has been so evident in the past two years, we can succeed. As the situation surrounding Covid-19 continues to improve, much-needed resources will be rerouted back into the fight against TB.

Of course, I recognise that meeting the 2030 target will require concentrated and focused effort, and that we must act quickly to make up for lost time. Although progress has been made, I know that our work is far from done. That is why the Government remains committed to supporting the

sustainable development goal of ending TB by 2030. We will continue to work with Public Health Scotland and other colleagues to drive that work forward.

I extend my sincere thanks to all those who have worked so tirelessly to reduce the impact of TB on lives across the world. This debate has been an excellent opportunity to highlight the fantastic work that is being done to reduce the impact of TB. It has also allowed us to take stock and to consider how we can move forward.

The Covid-19 pandemic has left its mark, as it has on so much of our lives. We will harness the learning and the togetherness that have been so evident in the past two years as we move forward. I commit to continuing to strive for a future in which TB is eliminated here in Scotland and across the world.

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

13:15

*Meeting suspended.*

14:00

*On resuming—***Point of Order**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Good afternoon, colleagues. I remind you that Covid-related measures are in place and that face masks should be worn while you move around the chamber and the wider Holyrood campus.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance with regard to a question that was raised with the First Minister by Christine Grahame. In that question, the member said that the United Kingdom had “the worst” state pension in Europe.

I think that it is important to set the record straight, because facts matter in this chamber. The fact is that the United Kingdom has a higher pension as a proportion of income maintained after retirement than Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Estonia and Lithuania. Perhaps, Presiding Officer, you can advise me on how I might correct the record and on what training is available for members to avail themselves of that data on the website of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and ensure that such mistakes are not made again.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Kerr. As members will be aware, there is a mechanism that can be used to correct any contributions that are made in the chamber. Guidance on those mechanisms can be provided, but I think that Mr Kerr has made his point.

**Portfolio Question Time****Rural Affairs and Islands**

14:01

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** We move on to portfolio questions, and the portfolio this afternoon is rural affairs and islands. Anybody who wishes to ask a supplementary should press the request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function during the relevant question.

Question 1 has been withdrawn.

**Regional Food Groups (Support)**

2. **Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to regional food groups. (S6O-00911)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** We support those groups through a £250,000 annual fund that is delivered by Scotland Food & Drink and which allows groups across the country to resource co-ordinator posts within each group. The fund, which leverages match funding from partners, including local authorities, allows for the establishment of an active network of regional ambassadors who work in conjunction with local authorities to promote regional food and drink and tourism strategies. That support has ensured that we have 19 regional food groups operating collaboratively within their regions and collectively in partnership across Scotland.

**Siobhian Brown:** As the cabinet secretary is aware, the Ayrshire food and a’ that group in my constituency aims to identify and provide new opportunities for food and drink in Ayrshire, including in areas of activity such as local procurement, education, and skills and training. Does the cabinet secretary share my view that such organisations are vital to continuing the good work that Scotland has accomplished in our cultural approach to food as we strive towards our ambition of being a good food nation?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I absolutely do. It is really clear to me that the regional food groups have an absolutely pivotal role to play in telling Scotland’s fantastic food and drink story. They will also be fundamental to the delivery of the next phase of the ambition 2030 strategy at local and national level.

The work of the Ayrshire food and a’ that group that the member has outlined is exactly the kind of approach that we want to see and encourage. The work that it is undertaking on all the areas that the member talked about, such as education and



procurement, will help us build the good food nation and become the good food nation that we want to be. I also envisage the regional food groups playing a key role as we look to develop the national and local good food nation plans set out in the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill. They will also be vital partners in developing our local food strategy, which has been based on our recent consultation.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We have a brief supplementary from Rhoda Grant, who joins us remotely.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** Being a good food nation means that people should have adequate access to food, too. This week, I heard of a really sad case of an elderly person who ended up in hospital due to starvation, not because they did not have food, but because they did not have the electricity to cook it. What support has the cabinet secretary given to groups that are trying to help people in that situation access both food and the means to cook it?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The member raises a really important question, and some of that was teased out earlier this week in the stage 1 debate on the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill. We will also be enshrining people's right to adequate food in Scots law as part of a human rights bill, but we are also trying to give effect to that right through the work that we are undertaking at the moment and through the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which provides the legal framework and underpinning in that respect.

However, we are always looking at ways of supporting people. I completely understand the issues that the member has raised, but, unfortunately, we are going to see such situations increasingly often, given the number of people who are—and will continue to be—in fuel poverty. That situation is set only to get worse. Where it is within our capabilities to do so, the Scottish Government is trying to do all that we can to address those issues.

### Farm Improvements

**3. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests with regard to agriculture.

To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to help farmers make improvements to their farms. (S6O-00912)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** The Scottish Government supports farmers and crofters to make improvements through a range of measures, including the sustainable agricultural capital grant scheme and access to specialist advice and information through our farm advisory service.

I am also announcing today that we will run a further round of the knowledge transfer and innovation fund in 2022-23, with £1.6 million available to support projects that enable more sustainable and low-carbon farming and crofting. KTIF has a significant track record of supporting projects that enable farmers, crofters and land managers to create improved opportunities for nature, adapt to climate change and benefit from new organic farming materials. That fund has helped us provide funding to some really exciting projects over the past few years, and I hope that people will apply for a share of this year's fund so that they can play their part in tackling climate change.

**Alexander Burnett:** There are reports that Lorna Slater is not prepared to convert wild land into farms. Rewilding is important, but this Government must be ready to adapt in the face of rising food prices and shortages. Does the cabinet secretary think that a dogmatic, inflexible approach from the Greens could hold back support for our farmers in response to the crisis in Ukraine?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I know that Alexander Burnett's colleague is going to ask me a question on that topic later on but, in relation to some of the requests that have been made in that regard, I reiterate the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting our farmers, crofters and food producers. That has been a core part of the vision that we outlined and published earlier this month, and we are committed to continuing that work. The horrendous war and acts that we are watching unfold in Ukraine highlight the vital importance of our food security. We recently established a task force to help us address some of those issues and the immediate matters that we face, and we will also look at what we can do to tackle those issues over the medium and longer term.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Does the cabinet secretary share my dismay at the Tories' failure to deliver on their Brexit promise to at least maintain current rural funding? Instead, they are now short-changing Scotland in this parliamentary session to the tune of £93 million, which could have been provided to farmers to help them mitigate, address and adapt to climate change.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes, I absolutely share the member's dismay in that regard. The Scottish Government has been clear and consistent that we expect—because we were promised—full replacement of European Union funds to ensure no detriment to Scotland's finances. We would have expected the United Kingdom Government to fully respect the devolution settlement in any future arrangement but so far, that has not happened. My colleagues in the Administrations in

Wales and Northern Ireland share our frustration in that regard.

There was also a Bew review commitment to holding meaningful discussions to agree the principles of future intra-UK allocations. Those discussions should have occurred before the UK spending review, but we are still waiting on the UK Government and George Eustice to meet that commitment.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** In response to my colleague, Martin Whitfield, in September, the cabinet secretary said that food should be

“processed as close as possible to the point of primary production”—[*Official Report*, 2 September 2021; c 46.]

She also committed the Scottish Government to working with any operators that are looking to take forward a mobile abattoir model. Now that six months have passed, can the cabinet secretary update the chamber on what steps she is taking to improve abattoir provision? Will the Scottish Government take forward the mobile abattoir model if no prospective operators come forward?

**Mairi Gougeon:** My previous commitment still stands, and we still stand ready to work with anybody who is interested in taking forward the model. I stand by what the member quoted in the first part of her question, in that we are trying to ensure, as far as we can, that food is processed as locally as possible.

We have been considering all those issues in our draft local food strategy, which has been out for consultation. That consultation closed towards the end of last year; we are still analysing the responses to it and will be setting out our response in due course.

#### “SnareWatch Annual Report 2021”

**4. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the “SnareWatch Annual Report 2021” from OneKind. (S6O-00913)

**The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan):** I am aware of the report’s findings and I understand the concerns around the use of snares.

We recently concluded a review of snaring, as required by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which we will publish shortly. I have commissioned an additional review, which will look beyond the terms of the 1981 act to consider a potential ban on snaring. It will look at land management aspects of the matter, as well as animal welfare.

In the meantime, Scotland has the most robust laws on snaring in the United Kingdom. We remain

committed to the highest possible animal welfare standards.

**Ruth Maguire:** I thank the minister for that very full answer. Ending cruelty against animals is tremendously important to me and my constituents. With that in mind, will the minister tell us more about the second review that she has commissioned?

**Màiri McAllan:** I am happy to do so. As I said, the initial review is complete, and I will be pleased to share the detail of it shortly. I have commissioned the further review and we will look beyond the terms of the 1981 act, including at considering a ban. I hope to announce the details of that shortly.

I know how strongly the member and the public feel about the matter. I am clear that we need control measures, but we cannot and must not tolerate suffering. I will look to include that in the terms of the review.

#### Crops (Gene Editing)

**5. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with scientists regarding gene editing of crops. (S6O-00914)

**The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan):** Scottish Government ministers and officials speak regularly with scientists on a range of issues, including gene editing, and we have access to a wealth of scientific expertise, including that of the chief scientific adviser for environment, natural resources and agriculture and the chief plant health officer, and research and evidence provided by centres of expertise such as the Plant Health Centre.

**Russell Findlay:** My colleague Rachael Hamilton recently met the Roslin institute, which once again reaffirmed its support for giving gene editing the green light in Scotland. Why is the Scottish Government continuing to fail to support Scotland’s top scientists on the issue?

**Màiri McAllan:** There are a range of views on the matter, which I am following closely. I greatly welcome scientific opinion on it. However, our policy on genetic modification has not changed. Russell Findlay and his Tory colleagues might be prepared to hurriedly change environmental standards post Brexit, but this Government is not. We will take a considered approach and I am closely following progress at European Union level in that regard.

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** Can the minister advise whether the Tory United Kingdom Government has shared or provided any

cumulative impact assessment of the two trade deals that it has negotiated since Brexit, both of which will, by its own admission, see growth fall in UK and Scottish agriculture?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, that is not relevant to gene editing. Unless you advise me otherwise, I do not think that there is anything that you can add that would relate back to the original question.

**Màiri McAllan:** Perhaps I could add something in regard to advice received, Presiding Officer, but I will take your view on the matter and will not answer the question.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** At the previous rural portfolio questions, the cabinet secretary was clearly confused between genetically modified organisms and gene editing. Now, it appears that the minister is equally confused. Will the minister please take the time to understand the difference between GMOs and gene editing? Scotland's farmers can see potential benefits in gene editing. Why can the Scottish Government not?

**Màiri McAllan:** The member need not try to patronise, belittle or outsmart me, because he will not succeed.

I am following closely both scientific and judicial reasoning about the decoupling of GM and gene editing. The latter is a process that it is considered could also have occurred naturally, and not through the gene editing process. However, as I have said to the member's colleague, our position has not changed, and I am following the EU in this regard.

### Farming (Young People)

6. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is putting in place to attract younger people into the farming sector. (S6O-00915)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** We recognise that getting young people into the sector is key to driving forward our rural economy, and we know that younger people face a number of obstacles to getting into the sector, which can be off-putting. That is why the Government is continuing to support young people by developing skills and talent through our skills action plan for rural Scotland, and through the skills for farming group, to guide employers on apprenticeships and work placements.

Additional support will continue to be provided by our farming opportunities for new entrants group, the Scottish Land Matching Service and the Farm Advisory Service.

**Liz Smith:** I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her acknowledgement that there is a problem, because I have recently been contacted by several younger constituents across Mid Scotland and Fife who are struggling to get into the farming sector. That issue has been highlighted at some local NFU Scotland meetings. Recent Scottish Government statistics show that, since 2016, the Scottish Government's opportunities for new entrants programme has helped only 76 young entrants to get into farming. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is a disappointingly low number and that a new strategy is required to address that?

**Mairi Gougeon:** We have a manifesto commitment to look at that, which is why I welcome the evaluation that has recently been published. I was pleased to read in the evaluation that the grants were successful in encouraging 254 new younger entrants into the sector, and that we granted more than £11.6 million to allow that to happen.

As the member said, the review highlighted that there are also challenges relating to land availability and the profitability of agricultural businesses. There remain considerable barriers to new entrants, which grants alone will not be able to address. However, as I have just intimated, we will be using the outcomes of the review to help to shape the future plans for new entrant support, in line with our manifesto commitment.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will take a couple of supplementary questions. Make them as brief as possible, please.

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Can the cabinet secretary advise Parliament about the SkillSeeder programme, what it does and how it is being funded?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The SkillSeeder company is delivering an easily accessible rural and land-based training IT platform. Ultimately, that aims to break down the barriers for people throughout rural Scotland and make it easier for people to find the right training for them, and for skill sharers and trainers to easily reach people who need their training. There are already 5,000 courses on the platform, including from colleges, machinery rings, renewable companies and forestry organisations. We recently announced some funding in relation to that, so I would encourage people who are interested in undertaking training to seek out those opportunities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Evelyn Tweed.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Sorry—I mean Audrey Nicoll. I was looking at the wrong paper.

**Audrey Nicoll:** I appreciate that Liz Smith's questions related to the farming sector but, similarly, the fishing and seafood industries are working hard to attract young people to their sectors. That includes fish processors in my constituency, who are working with Seafish and the Scottish Seafood Association through campaigns such as "Sea a Bright Future". Will the cabinet secretary give an update on the work that is being done to support young people to move into the fishing and processing sectors?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I like to keep members on their toes.

**Mairi Gougeon:** That is another area where we are keen to see new entrants. The marine fund Scotland has supported new entrants to secure their positions in the fishing industry. For example, we have been assisting young fishers to purchase their first fishing boat or to have a share in a fishing boat. To date, we have awarded around £2 million of funding to assist entry of young fishers to the sector. The fund has also supported new entrants by providing grant support to Seafish to deliver training in Scotland.

### Aquaculture (Licensing)

**7. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will implement the findings of the first stage of the review on licensing in the aquaculture sector. (S6O-00916)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** The review that was undertaken by Professor Russel Griggs is comprehensive and ambitious, and it fulfils the remit that was given to him. I take this opportunity to thank Professor Griggs again for his work and all the effort that he put into producing it.

I have made clear my agreement to all the recommendations in principle, and I will announce shortly the next steps that will take us beyond this first phase. It is vital that we maintain that momentum and approach our commitment to streamline the regulatory process for aquaculture at pace.

**Annabelle Ewing:** I am pleased to hear that there is an intention to proceed speedily. The cabinet secretary will be aware that 600 jobs in Rosyth in my constituency depend on the success of the salmon industry. I therefore ask her to confirm that she will instruct her officials to work at pace to implement the Griggs review recommendations, because that will ensure a better, more efficient and transparent aquaculture regulatory framework, which is essential for future sustainability and competitiveness. Will she also

confirm that she will work constructively with industry to get that right?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes—that is certainly my intention. Aquaculture is hugely important to Scotland's economy and I recognise that Rosyth is one of the communities that depend on the success of a sustainable aquaculture industry. As I have mentioned, we are determined to make sure that we continue with that momentum and pace in progressing work that takes us beyond the first phase of the review. We are committed to that collaborative working and we will continue to engage with stakeholders into phase 2 of the aquaculture review and in the production of a Government-led vision for aquaculture.

As part of our manifesto commitments, we said that we would reform and streamline regulatory processes so that development is more responsive, transparent and efficient. To achieve that, we are also committed through our manifesto to implement a process that will bring greater clarity and speed to the process of aquaculture regulation. We appointed Professor Griggs as part of our commitments for our first 100 days. We are now finalising the next steps into phase 2 of the work that is required to move beyond the status quo.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** The mortality rate of salmon in Scottish salmon farms was 24 per cent in 2020. Environmental sustainability depends on the robust enforcement of compliance, but the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and NatureScot have recently suffered successive budget cuts. Would any new licence fee be used to pay for the greatly expanded independent monitoring of impacts on fish farms, especially sea lice counts and fish deaths?

**Mairi Gougeon:** As I said in my previous response, we will build on the work that has just been announced and continue that momentum. It would be premature of me to make any specific commitments in relation to what the member is talking about, given the phase that the work is at.

As part of the Bute house agreement, we recognised that an immediate programme of work needed to be carried out in that regard. I highlight to the member and others across the chamber that we set out our response to the salmon interactions working group to try and tackle some of the existing issues while we were undertaking the review.

### Agriculture Policy (War in Ukraine)

**8. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it is adapting its agriculture policy for crops and livestock due to the war in Ukraine. (S6O-00917)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** The Scottish Government recognises the impact that the terrible war in Ukraine is having on global agrifood markets. On 17 March, we announced, jointly with industry leaders, the establishment of a short-life food security and supply task force to monitor, identify and respond to any potential disruption to the food and drink supply chain. It will recommend actions that can be taken to mitigate impacts, resolve supply issues and strengthen food security and supply in Scotland. We remain committed to producing more of our own food sustainably while maintaining and enhancing nature.

**Sue Webber:** The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need to support our farmers and growers to deal with crises such as inflationary pressure and the market volatility that they face. Will the cabinet secretary promise that her Government will not approve any more deals to send thousands of sweet potatoes to Russia?

**Mairi Gougeon:** A few points need to be clarified in relation to the issue. The Scottish Government does not approve export deals. We have led calls for businesses to disinvest in Russia as a result of the invasion of Ukraine, and we have communicated that clearly to the sweet potato suppliers concerned. The Scottish Government and its economic agencies will use all available powers not to support trade and investment activity in Russia. When a company makes a decision to export plants or plant products from Scotland, including sweet potatoes, Scottish Government officials are required to carry out various activities, including inspection and certification of goods, but the Scottish Government does not approve export deals.

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** It was said earlier that the terrible conflict in Ukraine will impact on food security in Scotland. That was highlighted in the debate on the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill on Tuesday. How is the United Kingdom Government involving the Scottish Government and the other devolved Administrations in discussions and deliberations in that area?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Across the Scottish Government, we are in contact with the UK Government on a range of aspects relating to the conflict and its impact. The First Minister attends a weekly domestic resilience meeting that is chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and Ukraine has been one of the top agenda items at our regular interministerial group meetings with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other devolved Administrations.

I continue to press for further engagement with the Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Victoria

Prentis, to ensure that we are closely involved in responding to the fast-moving situation. I did so at the most recent interministerial group meeting, which took place at the start of this week. In that meeting, Victoria Prentis assured all the relevant devolved ministers that there would be on-going close contact and liaison, given that many issues that are impacted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine are devolved and shared across the UK. I am keen to ensure that that commitment is followed through, and I will do what I can to ensure that it is.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** I wish the cabinet secretary well in getting that engagement, because she will know that many Ukrainian seasonal workers are carrying out outstanding work in supporting Scottish agriculture and fruit growing. Although their visas have been extended until December, the visas are valid only as long as the worker stays on their current farm or is placed on another farm by their sponsor. Those workers cannot apply for their families to join them, and they generally have no recourse to public funds.

Will the cabinet secretary consider what more support the Scottish Government could give to those farm workers and, indeed, to help more farm workers to come to Scotland from Ukraine, including support on how they might be able to bring their family over and access public funds and services, given the enormous contribution that all those workers make to Scottish farming and fruit picking?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Absolutely. We are committed to doing that, and we are doing all that we can to ensure that we give that support where possible.

I provide the assurance to members across the chamber that we are engaging closely and regularly with our fruit and vegetable producers. We are, of course, aware that there are workers from Ukraine already here. The plan was for many more to join them as part of the seasonal workforce, but it is clear that that is unlikely to happen. However, we are working urgently with all our stakeholders, and internally, to determine how best we can support those workers. That includes ensuring that they are aware of, and are known to, the parts of the Government that are co-ordinating our action to support Ukrainian refugees.

We have also reached out to RSABI with a view to utilising its seasonal worker helpline, which is already established. We are working closely with it to find out how it can provide assistance.

We want to provide all the practical and emotional support that we can, and we will certainly do everything that we can, with the powers and resources that we have, to provide that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes portfolio question time. I apologise again to Audrey Nicoll and Evelyn Tweed for the confusion.

I remind members that, if they have a question or intend to ask a supplementary question at portfolio question time, they need to be here at the beginning of questions and remain until the end. I will not name and shame on this occasion, but let that be noted.

## Retail Strategy

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a statement by Tom Arthur on a retail strategy for Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

14:29

**The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur):** I am pleased to announce the publication of our retail strategy for Scotland today. The strategy recognises the importance of retail to Scotland's communities, society, environment and economy, and it has been developed in collaboration with business, trade unions, academia and the public sector. I am thankful for the contribution of each person who has been involved.

Our shops often support neighbourhoods and communities. In rural areas or on our islands, the local shop is often the provider of lifeline products. Shops attract people into towns and cities and support other economic sectors such as tourism, culture and hospitality.

Retail also offers many people successful and flexible careers, from a first job in a local shop through to a career in distribution, supply chain businesses, large stores, ownership or management. With more than 240,000 employees—almost 10 per cent of Scotland's entire workforce—retail is our largest private sector employer. It contributed £6.1 billion gross value added to the Scottish economy in 2019.

There are more than 15,500 retail businesses in Scotland, with growth of almost 2,000 since 2018. A strong, prosperous and vibrant retail sector is essential to fulfilling the vision of a wellbeing economy that we set out in Scotland's national strategy for economic transformation. However, there is no doubt that our retailers and their staff have had a challenging time over the past two years. I have been incredibly grateful that so many of them went above and beyond for their customers and the most vulnerable in society during this exceptional period.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, the Scottish Government has done what it can to help businesses, including providing more than £4.5 billion of support. We are the only Government in the United Kingdom to offer 100 per cent rates relief for the past two years without any cap and are preventing a cliff-edge return to full liability by extending that support for retail through rates relief for the first three months of 2022-23. We are also supporting our high streets through the £10 million Scotland loves local programme and the £80

million Covid economic recovery fund, which encourages people to use and support their local businesses.

The pandemic has accelerated longer-term trends in, for example, online shopping, sustainable practices and the changing face of the high street. There remain challenges ahead, with staff shortages, rising inflation and the growing squeeze on living standards and business costs as a result of global trends and, of course, Brexit. Our retail strategy sets out actions that are designed to support the sector to rebuild after Covid, address longer-term challenges and maximise opportunities to fulfil its potential.

As we have seen during the pandemic, our retailers have been agile and creative in their response to meeting customer needs. Many have expanded their online and delivery capability. Many have switched to more ethical and sustainable products, packaging, sourcing and distribution. There are more retail businesses now than before the pandemic. That innovative and enterprising spirit will stand the sector in good stead as it evolves to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Having set out in our strategic framework update how we will move beyond the pandemic, the time is right to publish the retail strategy. It builds on the national strategy for economy transformation and the Covid recovery strategy, and it sets out a shared vision for retail to become an exemplar for inclusive economic growth and play its part in creating a fairer, greener Scotland.

The retail strategy seeks to do that by building on the sector's strengths so that it is successful, resilient, sustainable and profitable to the benefit of all in Scotland. We want to support innovation and entrepreneurship and to seize opportunities from new technology and markets to boost productivity and grow businesses. In that way, our retailers can benefit from and contribute to the bold programme of actions that will transform our economy over the next decade.

At the heart of the strategy, and a successful sector, are our people. As we further orient our economy towards wellbeing and fairness in order to significantly reduce poverty, we want to make fair work and skills development cornerstones of retail in Scotland. We want all retail workers have fulfilling and secure jobs. As I said in my statement to Parliament on 26 October last year,

"The retail strategy will have fair work at its core, which will benefit retail businesses by making them more attractive to workers and more resilient, productive and profitable."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2021; c 45.]

Unfortunately, employment law is currently reserved to the United Kingdom Government. With powers in that area, we could do more to protect

and enhance workers' rights, tackle poverty and increase fairness through legislation. However, we are determined to do all that we can, with the powers that we have, to make a difference.

I can announce today that we will work in collaboration with the sector and with trade unions to deliver a fair work agreement to which retailers can sign up to demonstrate an on-going commitment to fair work principles. That will include providing good-quality, secure employment and giving employees an effective voice. I expect that employers, in doing so, will take action to improve fair work conditions across retail and contribute to the reduction of in-work poverty.

Retail is a great choice for many. It offers opportunities for entry into the workforce, career progression and flexible working. It is vital that our workers have the right skills to enable them to have rewarding and secure careers and to grow businesses. That means strong customer service skills, which drive sales and business profitability. It also means new skills—for example, to harness the potential of new technology such as self-scan checkouts and online order systems. That is why we will work with Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and other partners to develop a retail skills audit and action plan. It will support reskilling and upskilling as jobs change in order to meet the needs of retail businesses and the careers of the people whom they employ.

A further aim is to strengthen retail's contribution to the economic and social success of our local communities. Different locations have bespoke needs, and our retail sector has a pivotal role to play in helping to create and maintain successful places. We know that the pandemic has driven down footfall in some places, while others, including many local high streets, have thrived. There are already a number of place-based programmes to support retailers, such as the Scotland loves local campaign and business improvement districts. The actions in the strategy will support our retailers to think local—to work collaboratively in their communities; support local businesses and supply chains where possible; promote town and city centres; and consider creative responses to vacant retail units. We believe that that will build greater wellbeing in our neighbourhoods and in our town and city centres.

Reducing Scotland's carbon footprint is essential to achieving our climate change targets and securing a just transition to a net zero economy by 2045. Our retailers have a crucial role in that regard through building secure local supply chains, adopting circular practices, increasing repair-and-reuse options and improving sustainable operations. Many retailers are already decarbonising their supply chains, setting their

own net zero targets and encouraging customers to lead lower-carbon lifestyles, which is great to see. The strategy builds on that. We will, for example, develop a just transition plan for retail that will progress an environmentally and socially sustainable sector in the economy of the future.

The strategy rightly has a strong delivery focus and we, as a Government, will play our part in that. However, we cannot—and should not—be the sole vehicle for change. That is why we will establish a new industry leadership group for retail. Building on the collaboration that was involved in creating the strategy, the industry leadership group will oversee the development and delivery of strategy commitments such as those that I have just mentioned. It will focus on the actions in the national strategy for economic transformation that will directly support the retail sector. The leadership group will also agree a delivery plan, which will include a critical review process and timelines for measuring success. I will co-chair the group, and I look forward to that work getting under way.

The title of the strategy, “Getting the Right Change”, is more than a play on words. I make it clear that the publication of the strategy is just the beginning. It is the start of a new conversation with businesses and trade unions, customers and workers about how to support our retailers to overcome challenges and seize opportunities as we rebuild after Covid, and about how our recovery should improve the lives of people and their families—people who work in retail and the customers they serve.

Our vision is for a thriving, successful and profitable retail sector in Scotland that is an exemplar of inclusive economic growth. The strategy can make that vision a reality and ensure that we do, indeed, get the right change.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions. It would be helpful if those members who wish to ask a question press their request-to-speak buttons now and, at the same time, check that their cards are in.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I thank the minister for early sight of the statement and welcome the collaborative approach. The minister knows as well as the rest of us that, towards the end of last year, businesses and industry were saying that the Scottish Government had not consulted them enough. Therefore, it is good to hear that there is a change in direction to address their concerns.

I have three areas of questioning. First, on a short-term basis, businesses are obviously

desperate to receive support as quickly as possible. However, what analysis has been taking place of some of the successful schemes? For example, the high street scheme in Northern Ireland has generally proved to be successful. In addition, what analysis has been undertaken on the business improvement district schemes in Scottish towns? I am aware of some in Mid Scotland and Fife that have been particularly successful, but there are, sadly, others that have not been successful. It would be interesting to know why some have worked and some have not, so I would be interested to hear what the minister has to say about that.

Secondly, what commitment has the Scottish Government made to look at transportation issues? People will not come to some of our town centres unless good-quality transport is available. I would be interested to know what discussions the minister is having with his colleagues in the transport portfolio.

Finally, in the long term, there obviously has to be a commitment to addressing some of the rising costs that businesses are facing, which are their main concern. Does the Scottish Government have a firm plan to look at reform and modernisation of the business rates system, which many businesses find extremely complex?

**Tom Arthur:** I thank Liz Smith for her question and welcome her support for the collaborative approach that we are taking through an industry leadership group. That collaborative approach will be fundamental to realising the ambitions in the strategy. I will address the points in the order that she raised them.

Liz Smith asked about short-term interventions and, in particular, how our analysis of those interventions is informed. As I outlined in the statement, we have provided a range of support over the past two years during the pandemic. Most recently, the £80 million Covid economic recovery fund has been provided to local authorities, giving them an opportunity to support businesses in their areas in a way that is specific to them.

I note that reference was made to the voucher scheme in Northern Ireland. We have the Scotland loves local fund and the Scotland loves local gift card and I know that Glasgow City Council is looking at that mechanism for delivering support. What I see as fundamental is ensuring that we work in partnership with local authorities. They were members of the steering group and there was local authority engagement throughout the process of designing the strategy via the steering group.

We need to ensure that there is flexibility, because although retail will face certain common challenges in all parts of Scotland, some of the



challenges will be unique to particular localities. We need provide support to local authorities to enable them to support and work with business, which often happens in other ways as well. The place-based investment programme provides capital support and there will be £10 million over five years for the Scotland loves local programme.

We are grateful for the work that Scotland's Towns Partnership undertakes in delivering business improvement districts. We provided more than £500,000 during the pandemic to support BIDs. We recognise that there have been some challenges, so I am committed to undertaking continuous engagement with Scotland's Towns Partnership to learn what lessons we have to from the pandemic about how we can strengthen the support that we provide for BIDs.

On the issue of transport access to town centres, some of that will be captured in what we are doing around the forthcoming town centre action plan. Ms Smith will also be aware of our transport aspirations with regard to 20-minute neighbourhoods, as contained in draft national planning framework 4 and consistent with the sustainable travel hierarchy as set in national transport strategy 2. We recognise that that is important. Ultimately, with regard to development, we would want to see an infrastructure first approach and a town centre first assessment. Again, that has been a long-standing element, but it is a fundamental part of our approach to 20-minute neighbourhoods in the national planning framework.

On the long-term issues around non-domestic rates, I appreciate that there were lengthy exchanges over the matter at the Finance and Public Administration Committee on Tuesday. Our position is that what businesses require right now is stability. A revaluation is forthcoming. As I said in the committee, we welcome the work of the Fraser of Allander Institute on its review of the small business bonus scheme. Although we are committed to that scheme for this parliamentary term, we will establish a short-life working group to reflect on the report that the Fraser of Allander Institute has provided. We all recognise that more data will allow us to be more bespoke in the design of our policies and ensure that all our policy interventions on non-domestic rates and other taxes deliver the maximum impact that we want to see.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** I apologise for not being in the chamber in person for what I consider an incredibly important statement. I also refer members to my entry in the register of interests, as I am a director of a company with a residual retail interest and I am a member of USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers.

I welcome this report earnestly and I agree with the preamble that the minister has provided. I also add a really important element, which is that retail is fundamentally the interface through which people's salaries get recycled into the productive economy. Therefore, retaining retail is vital not just for the people who are employed in the sector or for the people who obtain goods and services from it but for the whole supply chain of a productive economy.

The report is useful and it identifies the right areas, but I question whether it identifies clear and new steps to address them. First, on productivity and technology, we know that there is a significant issue especially among small retailers with regard to technology uptake. Why, then, are no new initiatives identified to provide the flexible and clear support that they need? Likewise, on skills, we need more than just an audit of skills programmes. I wonder whether the new leadership group could have been empowered to design and deploy new skills programmes that would deliver the focus and flexibility that retail employers say is currently lacking.

On town centres and place, the linkage between office workers and retail footfall is key. In the short term, will the Scottish Government undertake a public reassurance programme to encourage people to get back into offices and deliver footfall, and will that element be incorporated in future iterations of the strategy?

Finally, I reiterate the points about business rates. As we discussed in committee, the link between non-domestic rates and business performance in retail, and indeed even business rents in the retail sector, is broken. Does the Scottish Government not realise that it fundamentally needs to review that levy?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I call the minister to respond, I point out that we have used up quite a lot of the limited time that is available with front-bench questions and answers. Although I will allow a bit of latitude, we really need to allow all MSPs who wish to ask a question to have their chance. I now call for succinct answers, minister, and for further succinct questions when I call other members.

**Tom Arthur:** Certainly. I will endeavour to be succinct, but I am happy to meet any member who wishes to discuss any aspect of the strategy in more detail when they have had further time to consider it.

To address the specific points that Daniel Johnson raised, we have a commitment to a skills audit, which will be followed up with an action plan that we will develop in partnership with Skills Development Scotland, the SFC and other

partners. The International Logistics Group will lead on that work too.

The member is correct to recognise the essential role that retail plays; it is a fundamental part of the broader ecosystem of our town and city centres.

Daniel Johnson made a point about the return to the office. Obviously, it will be for businesses to take a hybrid approach and we all recognise that the experience of hybrid working has proved to be very useful and beneficial for many people. Individual businesses, along with public sector organisations, will take their own decisions about how they incorporate hybrid working in the future. I encourage people to go out and shop in their high streets and city centres in support of local businesses.

I already touched on points around business rates in my answer to Liz Smith's question, so I will not repeat what I said.

My final points on encouraging people into town centres are that community wealth building features throughout the strategy and that there is power in anchor institutions—both public and private sector—playing a role in drawing people into localities, which can support retail and the wider economy.

**Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP):** Given that our town centres have been struggling for many years because of the combination of online shopping and industrial shopping estates opening up outwith town centres, does the minister agree that small independent retail businesses play a crucial role in providing essential services for our communities?

**Tom Arthur:** I agree entirely. There is a crucial role for small retail businesses, which has been exceptionally apparent during the pandemic, when they have provided lifeline goods and services, including to people who are vulnerable or shielding. I reiterate my thanks to all those who have gone above and beyond for the communities that they serve.

The actions in the strategy will support our retailers to think local and work collaboratively in their communities, and to support local businesses and supply chains, in line with the community wealth building approach. As I said in my statement, it is a people-centred approach to local economic development that seeks to ensure that wealth is less extracted from the local economy and more redirected back into it.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Will the minister advise members who will make up the new industry leadership group for retail, how much progress it has made in appointing a co-chair and when he expects the first meeting to take place?

**Tom Arthur:** I will update the Parliament in due course. My aspiration is that the ILG will meet for the first time prior to the summer recess.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I put on record my support and thanks to all the small retailers in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale for coming through the terrible challenges of Covid. Given the vital contribution that small business retailers in my constituency make to the wellbeing of our town centres and the local economies in Melrose, Galashiels, Peebles and Penicuik, for example, how can they contribute to Scottish Government thinking and the strategy?

**Tom Arthur:** Key to that will be the industry leadership group, details of which I outlined in my statement. There will be an opportunity for industry leaders, as well as trade union representation, to feed into that. I want to see a wider conversation and discussion follow on from the publication of the retail strategy, and I encourage everyone who is involved in the retail sector—people who are employed in the sector and those of us who use the sector—to feed into the approach. I am happy to meet Christine Grahame, as I am happy to meet any member from around the chamber, to discuss that in more detail.

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** Following the collapse of major retailers and larger retailers rationalising by closing stores, how will the retail strategy deal with the ownership of large, empty units, such as those that I see across my region, in a way that avoids speculation and incentivises investment?

**Tom Arthur:** It is an excellent question. At the heart of that will be our community wealth building approach. We obviously want to stimulate our local economies to increase demand for vacant units. We will take a range of actions to help to realise community wealth building as a central element. Some of the things that we will do include planning reform, land assembly, compulsory purchase and our support for regeneration through the place-based investment programme.

A range of measures will be put in place but, fundamentally, we must increase the demand for units. Central to that will be the stimulation of local economies and the community wealth building approach, which is well embedded in many local authorities in Scotland. We will move from an extractive model to one with more wealth circulating locally and being retained by local communities.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** The retail sector has sustained and is facing damage from Brexit, the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and, now, the war in Ukraine. Given

the impact on business costs and produce availability, how optimistic is the minister that the retail strategy is comprehensive enough to provide confidence to the retail sector?

**Tom Arthur:** It is an excellent question. We are living in unprecedented times and have been doing so for the past five years. The strategy is not a panacea, although it recognises and diagnoses some of the long-term systemic challenges that the retail sector has been facing.

Mr MacDonald is absolutely right to highlight the challenges that we are facing through the cost of living crisis. The strategy will be a living document and one of the first tasks of the ILG following its establishment is to develop a delivery plan that can take into account emerging events, including, for example, the cost of living crisis.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Rural, remote, and island areas rely on local shops that are often at the heart of the community. I also pay tribute to their hard work. They are also faced with barriers such as high delivery costs, minimum ordering that does not always align with storage and sales capacity limits, and planning that allows new supermarkets to be built on their doorsteps. Can the minister assure me that, given those issues, local community shops such as those found in my constituency and in other island and rural areas will be listened to by the new leadership group and that their voices will not be squeezed out?

**Tom Arthur:** Absolutely. I assure Beatrice Wishart that the industry leadership group will not just represent the breadth and diversity of the sector but the breadth and diversity of the geography of Scotland, and its different localities.

**Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):** As in other places, the retail sector in East Kilbride has been struggling for years, with companies such as Debenhams going bust, and others reducing the number of stores. How will the retail strategy benefit towns such as East Kilbride, which has a shopping centre rather than a high street, and help to revitalise a really important part of our town?

**Tom Arthur:** The heart of so much of our approach to local economic development is place based—creating communities and places where people want to visit, live and shop. That will be vital to the recovery from Covid of retail, culture, hospitality and tourism. Whether it be in high streets or shopping centres, retail is vital to our local communities, so the loss of anchor stores has an impact, as the member highlighted. We want retail businesses in all locations in our local communities to be successful and profitable, by being more productive and innovative, supporting entrepreneurship and driving business growth.

The shopping centre in East Kilbride has good public transport connections and a large community living in close proximity, in the same way as other towns.

We also have a number of place-based programmes that can support retailers and shopping centres, such as Scotland loves local, and business improvement districts, all of which are supported by the Scotland's Towns Partnership.

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** I thank the minister for his statement and for the helpful discussions that we have had about the strategy prior to today.

We are all aware of the challenges of automation in relation to job destruction, so I am pleased to see that the strategy discusses opportunities for automation to drive up product standards and reduce waste. Will the minister outline his thinking about how automation can also improve working conditions in retail and help us to meet wider sustainability goals? Can he also confirm what trade union representation there will be on the industry leadership group?

**Tom Arthur:** I am sorry, but I did not pick up the very last part of Maggie Chapman's question.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, please resume your seat. Maggie Chapman, could you possibly repeat just the last part of your question?

**Maggie Chapman:** Of course; my apologies. Can the minister confirm what trade union representation there will be on the industry leadership group?

**Tom Arthur:** I have already had constructive conversations with Tracy Gilbert of USDAW, and USDAW will be invited to be part of the group. I will be looking to ensure that we have maximum worker representation on the ILG. I will, of course, welcome any views from members across the chamber.

On the point about automation, Maggie Chapman is absolutely correct that it can be easy to focus on automation as something that displaces jobs rather than augmenting them. One of the opportunities that retail faces is using such augmentation to drive up standards and quality, to create new and more fulfilling jobs, and to create more opportunities. That is why we will take forward the skills audit and the skills action plan. It is also why the strategy aligns with our national strategy for economic transformation, particularly with the measures to drive up productivity.

I look forward to having such conversations in the ILG, and more widely with members across the chamber.

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)**  
**(Con):** The strategy document claims that the Scottish Government has

“delivered future-proofed mobile and broadband connectivity in remote, rural and island communities the length and breadth of Scotland”.

That claim is laughable. Will the minister who is responsible for Scotland’s digital strategy say when the Scottish Government will deliver on its reaching 100 per cent programme commitments and ensure that rural retailers can take full advantage of the opportunities of doing business online?

**Tom Arthur:** The Government is taking action, although I remind the member that telecommunications is a reserved matter. If only we had more powers in the Parliament, we could do far more.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The final question is from Stephanie Callaghan.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** I agree that the retail strategy represents an opportunity to advance Scotland’s wellbeing economy. How will the strategy feed into Scotland’s broader vision of an economic system that is based on wellbeing, fair work and community empowerment?

**Tom Arthur:** A strong, prosperous and vibrant retail sector is essential to the vision of the wellbeing economy, as described in Scotland’s new 10-year “National Strategy for Economic Transformation”. The retail strategy contains current initiatives and future actions that will fulfil that vision and rebuild after Covid in a fair and sustainable way.

It is important to support all retailers to align with the community wealth building approach, which includes local ownership and hiring of staff, adoption of fair work practices, engaging with community organisations, and considering local enterprises within the supply chain. Those are important elements of our approach, and they will ensure that local people and businesses have a genuine stake in producing, owning and enjoying the wealth that we create, moving us closer to the more just, equitable and sustainable society that we want as we rebuild Scotland’s post-Covid-19 economy.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you minister. That concludes the statement on a retail strategy for Scotland. I thank members and the minister for their co-operation.

## NHS Scotland (Pandemic Pressures)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf on pandemic pressures on NHS Scotland. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:00

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** This week, the number of people in hospital with Covid-19 has reached the highest level since the start of the pandemic, which is having a significant impact on our health and social care services across the entire system, but especially in accident and emergency departments.

Our health board colleagues and those who work on the front line all tell us that the past two weeks have been the toughest in the pandemic so far, and the latest data shows some of the lowest performance against the four-hour A and E target that we have seen.

That level of pressure impacts on patients and staff, and I want to start by thanking our national health service and social care staff, to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude and who continue to provide vital treatment and optimal patient care during the most challenging times. I have no hesitation in apologising to patients and those who have been in any way inconvenienced, or who are suffering, because of the current pressures for that suffering and inconvenience. I appreciate the patience that every person is showing at this extremely challenging time.

A number of factors are contributing to the impact on A and E services. Those include the fact that a record number of people are in hospital with Covid; the infection prevention and control measures that are currently in place; the exacerbation of workforce pressures by record levels of community transmission; the increased level of attendance at A and E services; the high levels of delayed discharge; and the longer length of hospital stays.

Today, there are 2,322 Covid patients in our hospitals. That number has more than doubled since February, and it is now past the previous peak of last winter, when 2,053 patients were in hospital with Covid in January 2021. Using the latest published Covid-19 modelling, we anticipate that the number might well continue to increase over the next few weeks.

The increase in cases and hospitalisations is largely due to the dominance of the more

transmissible omicron BA.2 variant, which accounts for about 90 per cent of all reported cases. The latest Office for National Statistics survey data shows that one in 14, or more than 7 per cent of people in the community in Scotland, would have tested positive for Covid in the week to 12 March. That is the highest estimate that Scotland has had since the survey began in autumn 2020.

Thanks to the excellent progress that has been made on vaccinations, the recent rise in cases and hospitalisations has not—thankfully—translated into an increase in the number of cases of people with severe illness who require intensive care. However, that level of continued pressure is challenging in the context of a health service that has been dealing with sustained and relentless demand and pressure for nearly two years. Unlike in wave 1 of the pandemic, when services were stood down, we are remobilising our national health service.

In addition, infection prevention and control guidance remains in place and is important for maintaining safety in our hospitals. However, that undoubtedly creates additional complexities and inefficiencies when it comes to moving people through the system—for example, patients cannot wait in the discharge lounge or “sit out” to wait for discharge drugs. That means that they must wait in the bed space for longer than required, and that space must then be deep cleaned prior to a new admission. In addition, patients cannot access normal transport and must travel on their own or with other patients with Covid.

I can advise that all four United Kingdom nations are looking to develop an exit strategy from the existing UK winter infection prevention and control guidance and are considering what a return to business as usual would look like. Next steps include a range of changes that, if implemented, would help to relieve some of the pressures that the system is currently experiencing. Ultimately, if we can control community transmission of Covid, we will help to alleviate the current pressures.

The level of absences attributed to NHS staff testing positive for Covid has increased by almost 100 per cent—it has doubled over the past four weeks to almost 4,700. That increase in staff absence puts an incredible strain on the delivery of health services. Healthcare workers who are asymptomatic are asked to test twice weekly. That includes all NHS and independent contractor staff in patient-facing primary care. We are reviewing that regularly as part of the testing transition plan. In the latest week, ending 22 March, an average of 6,000 NHS staff—about 3.4 per cent of the NHS workforce—were reported absent each day for a range of reasons related to Covid-19.

We have worked hard throughout the pandemic to maintain record staffing levels across our NHS. Under this Government, staffing levels are up by more than 28,000 whole-time equivalents to a record high. We have invested in growing our workforce by just under 10 per cent in the past two years to enhance our services' capacity to deal with the new pressures that they have faced.

We recognise the scale of the improvements required and are working closely with partners to accelerate domestic and international recruitment to Scotland. Our record £300 million of new investment to help services to deal with system pressures over winter led to the introduction of a range of direct workforce investments and new measures to support health boards' capacity for both domestic and international recruitment.

We are investing £11 million over the next five years in new national and international recruitment campaigns, and we have established a national centre for workforce supply to provide labour market intelligence. We are also recruiting at least 200 registered nurses from overseas, with funding of £4.5 million available to health boards to take that forward. We have asked boards to recruit 1,000 agenda for change staff to provide additional capacity across a variety of health and care services, with funding of up to £15 million. We are working with boards to develop nationally co-ordinated recruitment campaigns to actively recruit nursing and medical staff from within the UK. A band 5 nurse campaign was launched on 18 February. Scotland has, as we know, the best paid NHS staff in the UK, and we have made £12 million available this year to support staff wellbeing.

Increased demand is clearly creating pressure for our acute sites and across our NHS and social care systems. In the latest week, attendances at A and E departments increased to 26,000, which is the highest number in six months. The last time the number of Covid in-patients was above 2,000—which was in January 2021—there were 16,000 attendances at A and E departments in that week. That is an increase of almost 40 per cent, which is putting even more pressure on stretched services.

We also hear that people are presenting with higher acuity. They are sicker when they come to hospital and, as a result, have to spend longer in hospital. The average length of stay is up by about one day, or 16 per cent, which means that there is a greater requirement for beds.

Those issues are not unique to Scotland. Our A and E departments have been the best performing in the UK for the past six years. The latest comparable data for January shows that Scotland's A and E performance was 11.4

percentage points better than in England and 14.1 points better than in Wales.

Our colleagues in the community are also experiencing challenges. The current spread of Covid in the community is creating significant problems for our workforce. That is felt in social care. I know that our health and social care partnerships are working incredibly hard to support people in the community and those who are coming out of hospital. All partnerships are now involved in our discharge without delay programme to improve discharge planning arrangements and reduce the length of hospital stays.

Regarding planned care, our NHS colleagues are working exceptionally hard to restart elective activity. However, Covid, workforce and bed capacity pressures continue to create challenges, and we are now receiving reports that some restarted elective treatment is again having to be postponed to deal with the increasing pressure that our health boards are facing.

Extended waits for elective treatment increase the risk of deteriorating health and social care outcomes and can have an additional impact on unscheduled care. We are working closely with health boards and partners to support planning and the delivery of the high-level commitments in the NHS recovery plan that was published last summer.

We are also investing in our hospital at home programme. We have enhanced hospital at home services right across Scotland over the past few weeks, with further capacity expected to come on stream by the end of this month. That work is critical as we move into the recovery phase, and we are already beginning to see some of the fruits of that input. During the six-month period between September 2021 and February 2022, 4,500 patients received care from a hospital at home service. That is 4,500 people who, without those services, would have had to go to hospital. That resulted in 26,700 occupied bed days in hospital at home services, so we avoided 26,700 acute hospital bed days.

The redesign of the urgent care programme is incredibly important, too. We have supported it with £23 million this year, and it is another example of the positive work that we are undertaking. Through that programme, we are strengthening alternative services so that those who think that they need to go to A and E, but whose illness is not a critical emergency or life threatening, can be seen or treated at home or in the community.

We are also increasing funding for NHS 24 so that people can get good advice quickly, because I

know that some waiting times for NHS 24 have been too long.

I have been up front and honest about the scale of the challenge for our NHS recovery. It will take time. The recovery will not be achieved in a matter of weeks or months—it will take years. We are working closely with boards to deliver a package of measures to support sustainable recovery. How can we insulate that recovery in the event of future Covid-19 waves? That is the work that we are undertaking.

We will continue to fund our national treatment centres through the £400 million for the national treatment centre programme. That will, again, help us in our recovery, particularly with regard to elective care. NHS funding for 2022-23 is at the record level of £18 billion.

Our health and social care services continue to face unprecedented pressures—there is simply no denying that. I hope that I have managed to set the context in explaining why they are under such severe pressure. I will work day and night, as I have done since I was appointed to this role, to make sure that we support the men and women who are working so hard in our health and social care system. I will end where I started by thanking them again for their incredible efforts over the course of the pandemic.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow 20 minutes or thereabouts for questions, given the extra time that the cabinet secretary took for his statement. After that, we will move on to the next item of business.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** I would like to start by thanking all the heroic NHS staff who have worked throughout the pandemic and are still working hard now.

In his statement, the cabinet secretary essentially set out a list of excuses and patted himself on the back. How can he possibly do that with the problems that we are facing in the Scottish NHS?

The cabinet secretary talks about spending more per head than in England, but given the Barnett formula, funding here should be billions more. The cabinet secretary continues the self-congratulations by stating that we now have more staff in our NHS. That would be fine if demand were the same as it was even five years ago, but demand is significantly rising, and actually we have record vacancies in our NHS, in areas from nursing to physiotherapy.

That is not all due to Covid. The Government's lack of credible workforce planning and a flimsy Covid recovery plan have led us to this. What will

the cabinet secretary do to tangibly deliver help to us today, not in years? Plus, this statement was originally meant to be on A and E services. What immediate, tangible help will the cabinet secretary give to A and E departments? I ask because I fear that he is making excuses here and that there is nothing to actually tackle the problem.

**Humza Yousaf:** I am afraid that that is simply incorrect. It is not a list of excuses. I am setting out the context of why we are facing the pressures that we are facing. I would have thought that that would be helpful, given that people are rightly asking why our performance is where it is and why people are having to wait too long.

The member calls our recovery plan “flimsy”, but if it is flimsy, why on earth did his colleagues in London copy it? They imitated our plan—the 10 per cent additional capacity that we will create is a central plank of their recovery plan. It is not a flimsy recovery plan.

What I am trying to say to members across the chamber is that we have to insulate our recovery as well as we possibly can against future shocks and future waves of the pandemic. I have set out already in great detail—for the sake of brevity, I do not intend to rehearse it—all the funding that we are providing to our health boards, from the £300 million winter plan to the £20 million additional funding for our Scottish Ambulance Service.

If we had not made that investment, things would have been far worse than they are, so I am proud that we have higher NHS workforce numbers per head than in England, where the member’s party is in charge. Our A and E outperforms England, where his party is in charge; we have the best paid staff in the UK; we have more GPs per head than in England, where his party is in charge; and we have more dentists per head than where his party is in charge. It is no wonder that the people of Scotland continue to trust the Scottish National Party, not the Conservatives, to run our health service.

That is not a list of excuses. Today, I have demonstrated the context of why we have those challenges and how this Government is stepping up to them.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I welcome the cabinet secretary’s statement, but I look forward to a time when he is not just commenting on the context or how bad the problem is but actually taking action.

The number of patients who are waiting in A and E is at an all-time high. In fact, it is higher than at any time since records began in 2015. Of course, that is assuming that people can get to A and E, that they can get their call answered by NHS 24 or that they can get an ambulance to show up. I thank the staff who are working tirelessly, but they

are being let down by this Government. Everyone is waiting for this cabinet secretary to do something, but all he has are the answers that he gave in October 2021. Those initiatives have not worked. Delayed discharge has increased, and is taking up capacity in our hospitals, which has a direct impact on A and E.

As John Thomson, of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said,

“things cannot continue as they are, more patients will come to harm and staff will face increasing distress”.

Perhaps the NHS would have been more resilient if the cabinet secretary’s predecessors had not cut beds, had fixed the workforce crisis and had sorted social care. However, those problems are not new and they predate the pandemic. The cabinet secretary is playing fast and loose with the lives of Scots. We need more than sticking-plaster solutions and further excuses. When will he come to the chamber with a plan that will actually make a difference?

**Humza Yousaf:** Listening to Jackie Baillie, people would not realise that we are in the midst of a global pandemic. Not only are we in the midst of that global pandemic—

**Jackie Baillie:** Excuse!

**Humza Yousaf:** She is shouting “Excuse!”, but we have the highest number of people in hospital with Covid, the highest level of community transmission because of Covid, and there are high levels of workforce absence because people are testing positive for Covid. As much as I and, I suspect, Jackie Baillie would like to, we cannot just magic away the pandemic.

We are taking action. She asked what action we are taking and I can again go through the list of funding that we have provided. On top of that, our immediate action includes additional funding for the hospital at home programme. For example, I have just given her details of how we managed to save 26,700 acute hospital occupied bed days. She is right that delayed discharge numbers have been going in the wrong direction but, of course, when we have many outbreaks in many care homes, it becomes more difficult to discharge people into the community.

In some areas, we are making progress. When I met the City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh health and social care partnership, I learned that, since the end of January, they have managed to achieve a reduction in standard delays, so some health boards, local authorities and health and social care partnerships are moving in the right direction. Of course, keeping Covid under control would be our best tool in order to aid recovery.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** As we move on from front-bench questions, I would seek more succinct questions and answers.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** General practitioner receptionists are trained to guide callers to the best option for their health care needs, especially because it is not always the GP who is best placed to help. However, many GP receptionists, including those in my constituency, have reported an increase in abuse when they are doing their best to help. With the very stark figures that were announced today, it is likely that GP services will see an increase in people looking for an appointment. Will the cabinet secretary join me in urging callers to take guidance from GPs' receptionists, because they play an important role in getting people to care in the right place? Will he join me in thanking those receptionists—in my constituency and throughout Scotland—for the incredible dedication and commitment that they have shown in the past two years and beyond? Will he also join me in saying that that kind of behaviour from the public is unacceptable?

**Humza Yousaf:** I agree whole-heartedly with David Torrance. I thank all GP staff, from the GPs to the receptionists and all the multidisciplinary team members that work in a GP practice. Abuse towards any of our NHS or social care staff is completely unacceptable.

I do not at all buy into the narrative that GPs and their staff are not working hard to see patients. They are working extremely hard to see patients, which probably why, in his blog, the chair of the British Medical Association's general practitioners committee congratulated the Scottish Government on the approach that it has taken, which is in very stark contrast to the approach that the UK Government has taken.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Sue Webber joins us remotely.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** Yesterday afternoon, the cross-party group on women's health heard that midwives are leaving the profession in droves. They cannot cope with the stress that is placed on them by workforce pressures. Right across the sector, there are simply not enough of the right skilled staff on duty at any one time. Midwives are underfunded and overworked, and are, quite simply, burnt out.

The statement offers nothing new for them—no additional support and no additional funding. At what point will the health secretary cease his self-congratulatory tone, move out of his echo chamber and bring forward a credible plan to relieve the long-standing pressures on the midwifery profession—pressures that long predate the pandemic?

**Humza Yousaf:** I disagree with a few of those characterisations. There is nothing self-congratulatory; all that this Government and I have done is set the context of why we are in the challenging position that we are in.

Where I agree with Sue Webber is that the wellbeing of our staff is absolutely central. Every clinician and member of staff in our NHS and social care I speak to is, frankly, knackered, which is why I and the Government have brought forward funding to address staff wellbeing.

What I would say to Sue Webber is what I said to Jackie Baillie and Sandesh Gulhane: if we can control community transmission of Covid, that will significantly help us to alleviate pressure.

Let me place on record my thanks for the excellent work that midwives do right across Scotland.

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** Vaccines are the best line of defence. Fortunately, although we are seeing very high numbers of people in hospital, the vaccine is clearly having an impact on the number of lives lost to Covid.

Is the cabinet secretary optimistic that the uptake of the spring booster among those who are eligible will have as widespread and positive an effect as the previous booster?

**Humza Yousaf:** Yes, I am confident, and I agree with Evelyn Tweed's articulation that vaccines have been a game changer. I would encourage anybody who has not had any of the doses for which they are eligible—their first, second or third dose, or their booster—to please come forward, because vaccines are our number 1 tool in the fight against the virus.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** This week, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde once again issued a warning not to attend A and E unless the situation is life threatening. The board has used that warning repeatedly since August. People have been advised to use NHS 24 instead, but we know that, from September to January, 24,000 calls went unanswered.

That leaves people in a precarious position and not knowing where to turn, often in very serious situations. I note the statement's reannouncement of the opening of the Dundee contact centre. Can the cabinet secretary clarify how many additional staff are required to meet the demands on NHS 24 and how many have been recruited, in order to ensure that people are not put at risk when they are being told not to attend A and E, and ensure that their call is answered by NHS 24?

**Humza Yousaf:** I am certain that Paul O'Kane accepts this, but nobody who takes the decisions that have been taken by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and any other health board that has



taken them does so lightly. They do not put out messaging such as that on a whim. It is difficult to decide to do so but, ultimately, those decisions are made because of the pressure that health boards are under.

I have visited the NHS 24 site in Dundee. The recruitment is on-going, and it is taking place to help us meet that demand. NHS 24 is focused on ensuring that patients receive the correct advice immediately, without being required to be placed in a queue, and it has consistently exceeded the 90 per cent target for care delivered at the first point of contact. In fact, the 20 March statistics show that the number was up to 95.4 per cent. We are making progress, and the recruitment that we are undertaking will help to alleviate some of that pressure.

**Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP):** Everybody understands the acute pressure on the NHS, which will clearly have real consequences, not least for the capacity of our Scottish Ambulance Service to quickly get to those in need. I welcome the cabinet secretary's engagement on a case that I raised with him recently. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on how the Scottish Government will improve waiting times for ambulances?

**Humza Yousaf:** I thank Siobhian Brown for raising that case with me recently.

I reiterate what I said at the beginning of my statement: if anybody has to wait too long for an ambulance and suffers as a result of that, I make no hesitation in apologising to them for that inconvenience and any suffering that they have experienced.

Siobhian Brown is right. Our NHS and social care systems are interconnected, and therefore the pressures that are being faced in A and E are having an effect on the Scottish Ambulance Service. However, despite the challenges, including managing staff abstraction due to Covid, and serving in some of the most rural areas in the UK, in 2020-21, our ambulance crews responded to more than 70 per cent of the highest priority calls in under 10 minutes, and to 99 per cent in under 30 minutes. Ambulance crews are saving more critically unwell patients than ever before. Figures show that the 30-day survival rate for the sickest patients is at its highest rate, with a survival rate of 53.8 per cent.

I know that quoting the improvements that have been made and the significant efforts of our Ambulance Service may be cold comfort for those who have to wait a long time, which is why, in the summer of last year, I took action to ensure that there was more additional funding for our Ambulance Service.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** Like others, I pay tribute to all those working in our health and care services.

In January, I asked the Government when self-referrals for the over-70s to the breast cancer screening programme would resume. There was no mention of the resumption of self-referrals in the statement, despite the commitment in January to consider accelerating the timetable.

Can the cabinet secretary provide a clear timetable for when that service for the over-70s will resume, and an assurance that those who need or wish to be screened, including those in Orkney, who are reliant on a mobile screening unit visiting once every four years, can be seen without fear of lengthy delays?

**Humza Yousaf:** I have been actively engaging with our screening colleagues on that very question. I have gone back to them to ask whether we can accelerate the referral route for those who are 71 and over. I think that I said to the member in January that there is a difficulty there. If we were to do that now, it would probably extend the gap between cycles for those who are between 50 and 70. In looking at the benefits versus the risks, it may be that extending the gap would be beneficial for those who are 71 and over, in terms of self-referral. We are looking at the issue, and I would hope to have an update, if not in a matter of weeks, certainly in the near future. I will ensure that Liam McArthur is kept updated on those discussions.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary mentioned the importance of controlling community transmission of Covid. In one sense, community means the world; it does not just mean Scotland. Can the cabinet secretary say anything about what Scotland can do, either directly or through the UK Government, to help other countries through Covid?

**Humza Yousaf:** That is a fundamentally important point. Time and again, throughout the pandemic, we have said that nobody is safe until everybody is safe. That is absolutely true. Although we are not officially a member of the Covid-19 vaccines global access—COVAX—initiative, we have been in touch with the UK Government regularly on how we can help the vaccination effort across the world. We have asked how we can particularly focus some of our efforts on Malawi and Zambia, where we have important people-to-people relationships. I want John Mason to know that the Scottish Government is very keen to play its part as a global leader and a member of the global community in relation to vaccinations across the world.

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** In the week ending 13 March, 51.9 per cent of

people attending A and E in NHS Forth Valley were seen within four hours. That is the lowest figure of any health board in Scotland. I know that staff at Forth Valley have been working incredibly hard to improve waiting times, and that January saw remarkable improvement, so it is concerning that the figure dropped again. Forth Valley has one A and E unit, and demand is simply outstripping capacity. What more support can the Scottish Government provide to Forth Valley and other health boards that are experiencing similar pressures?

**Humza Yousaf:** The member is right that there have been concerns about Forth Valley. As she can imagine, I have spoken to the chief executive and chair of Forth Valley. However, on other metrics, Forth Valley performs well. For example, it has managed to protect some element of elective capacity, whereas other health boards have perhaps been unable to do so.

As I have said to every other member, the best thing that we can do, on top of the additional investment that I have announced, is to ensure that we get Covid transmission under control. In the period last year between the delta wave and the omicron wave—between October and November—when we had Covid transmission under control, there was a significant increase in scheduled operations. Our NHS has the ability to recover, and recover quickly, but we have to control Covid.

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** The cabinet secretary's statement, like his previous announcements, has lots of words but very few actions. He claims that the problems in Scotland's health service are largely down to pressures that are caused by the unprecedented number of patients who are in hospital with Covid. Can he say how many of the 2,322 Covid-positive patients are in hospital because of Covid and not only with Covid, and does he have data on the number of people who are admitted without Covid but go on to acquire it once in hospital? If he does not know basic things such as those, how on earth will the Government set about implementing its flimsy NHS recovery plan or set a new clinical route map to get the NHS back to business as usual?

**Humza Yousaf:** The member calls it a "flimsy" recovery plan, but it is a plan that his colleagues in Westminster copied. They copied our 10 per cent target and must have thought that it was a very good plan, so I am not sure why he chooses to call it "flimsy". If we had listened to the Tories, who demanded that we lift protective measures a long time ago, goodness knows how much more difficult the pressure from Covid would have been.

In relation to his question, I have asked NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to do another audit, similar to what it did during the original omicron

wave, to determine whether we can get greater detail about those who are in hospital with or because of Covid. As important as that data undoubtedly is, regardless of whether someone is in hospital with or because of Covid, the infection prevention and control measures around them remain, and that is what is putting significant pressure on our NHS.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Due to the success of the vaccination programme, we can move away from legal restrictions and rely on other behaviours. We know the value of appropriate face coverings in preventing the spread of Covid-19 but, with the possibility of that restriction being lifted soon, what assessment has been made of the need for people, especially those in vulnerable groups, to wear higher protecting FFP2 or equivalent masks when in clinical settings or crowded public places?

**Humza Yousaf:** To be brief, the Cabinet will have a discussion and come to a decision on potentially lifting the legal requirement to wear a face covering. That decision has not been made and will be debated in Cabinet on Tuesday, as you imagine, with the best and most up-to-date clinical advice that we receive.

In relation to the member's substantive point about FFP2 masks, I confirm that we are looking closely with our clinicians at whether higher protection could be afforded to those at highest risk through the use of FFP2 masks. The issue of the wearing of face coverings, including the grade of face covering, is kept under regular review.

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

## Child Poverty

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

The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on “Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-26”. The cabinet secretary’s statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during the statement.

15:33

### **The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison):**

The Scottish Government wants the best start and a bright future for all children. We want them to thrive and realise their potential, and we want Scotland to be the best place for them to grow up. For that to happen, we need to tackle the inequality and poverty that can too often blunt that potential.

There is no silver bullet to tackle child poverty. If there was, we would not be faced with the reality of one in four children living in poverty in Scotland today. No one actor can solve that on their own. A national mission to tackle child poverty is just that: a national and collective effort across society to deliver a bright future for our future generations.

The second tackling child poverty delivery plan is a plan to drive that effort and enable it to happen. Its actions recognise the contribution that all parts of society must make for all of Scotland. It is a road map towards delivering the ambitious statutory targets to significantly reduce child poverty by 2030 as laid out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which was unanimously passed by the Parliament.

When we published our first delivery plan in 2018, no one could have predicted what would happen in the intervening four years: a global pandemic; a cost of living crisis; the uncertainty and instability of Brexit; and now the illegal invasion of Ukraine, which has brought horror to a nation and a humanitarian crisis to the world.

We have also seen the United Kingdom Government’s removal of the £20 uplift to universal credit, which has taken £1,000 a year out of the pockets of low-income households, and the on-going impact of welfare cuts, including the benefit cap and the two-child limit. Given that context, a very significant risk to the delivery of our ambitions remains, particularly with a fixed budget and devolved powers, and the scale of the challenges has only increased.

Analysis that a number of organisations have done following the chancellor’s spring statement shows that, as the First Minister said earlier, there is no doubt that that was a missed opportunity to

give families the immediate support that they need in the face of a cost of living crisis. The Resolution Foundation has predicted that, across the UK, a further 1.3 million people are set to fall into absolute poverty in the next year, including 500,000 children, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that the chancellor’s lack of action means that he has cut the incomes of the poorest by £446. There is no doubt that the chancellor could and should have done much more to support those who have been hit the hardest.

Since 2018, we in the Scottish Government have made a real difference to families and laid strong foundations to deliver in the future. That includes through our new social security system, our massive expansion of funded early years learning and childcare, and our devolved employability services. Across the first three years—2018 to 2021—of our first tackling child poverty delivery plan, “Every child, every chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22”, we invested almost £5.9 billion in support of low-income households. It is estimated that almost £2.18 billion of that directly benefited children.

Despite that investment, we know that more is needed. To tackle the cost of living crisis, we have already announced an additional package of measures, including the £150 payment to households. That is in addition to our continued investment of more than £120 million for our Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments.

We are urgently considering how best to allocate the consequential flows from the announced increase to the household support fund. We found out about that funding only yesterday, and we will, of course, need to know the details before we make decisions.

Subject to Parliament’s approval, we will also increase the value of eight Scottish social security benefits, including our best start grants, by 6 per cent from April. That rise will ensure that those payments keep their real-terms value for families in the year ahead.

In the plan, our Government will go further in its support in order to provide the support that families need now and to drive progress towards the interim targets that have been set. We will double the game-changing Scottish child payment to £20 in just over a week and extend the payment to children who are under 16 by the end of this year. I am pleased to announce that we will go further still: we will increase its value again to £25 per week per child by the end of 2022. That is five times higher than the £5 payment that we were being asked to introduce less than five years ago. More than 400,000 children will be eligible, and it is expected that the payment will lift 50,000

children out of poverty in 2023-24. That is backed by investment of £225 million in 2022-23, rising to £445 million in 2023-24.

As a result of that increase, by the end of 2022, our package of five family benefits for low-income families will be worth more than £10,000 by the time that a family's first child turns six, and will be worth £9,700 for second and subsequent children. That compares with under £1,800 for an eligible family's first child in England and Wales, and under £1,300 for second and subsequent children. That is a difference of more than £8,200 for every eligible child born in Scotland.

That highlights the unparalleled support that is offered by the Government to support children in the early years. However, we will go further still. I can also announce that we will take immediate steps to mitigate the UK Government's benefit cap as fully as we can within the scope of devolved powers, backed by up to £10 million each year. That will help to support thousands of the lowest-income families, including lone-parent families, which are disproportionately impacted by the cap.

The delivery plan has been enhanced and supported by working in partnership with the Scottish Green group. The action to mitigate the cap is a clear example of that and highlights the commitment in the Bute house agreement to work together to tackle inequality and poverty.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission advised that further investment through social security is needed to meet the interim targets, and I have already set out the measures that we will take. The commission has also been clear about the need to increase incomes from work and earnings and to reduce household costs, and that is what we will do. Therefore, I am also pleased to say that we will significantly strengthen our employment services to support parents to enter, sustain and progress in work.

Our ambition is to support up to 12,000 parents to enter and sustain employment as a result of action taken over the life of the plan. That will be backed by up to £81 million in 2022-23 alone and will include additional investment for our no one left behind approach with local government, which is one of our key partners in the delivery of the plan. That investment will focus on providing both holistic key-worker support to our six priority family types and access to training and skills. It will also enable local employability partnerships to create supported labour market opportunities.

We will also deliver a new challenge fund, backed by up to £2 million in 2022-23, to test innovative approaches to support parents from priority families into work, and we will deliver a brand new £15 million parental transition fund with our local government partners to tackle the

financial barriers that parents face in entering the labour market. Families will be further supported by enhancement of our childcare offers and even greater action to tackle the digital divide in Scotland. To support the economic transformation that is needed, we will develop a shared vision for tackling child poverty in partnership with business and employers and will continue to drive progress on our commitment to be a fair work nation.

The plan also sets out steps to ensure that families are able to access an holistic package of support and entitlements when they need it. That includes investing £50 million of whole-family wellbeing funding in 2022-23, improving access to mental health services by investing £36 million over two years and investing £10 million to increase access to holistic advice services in the current session of Parliament.

We will also place the prioritisation of tackling child poverty at the heart of the affordable housing supply programme, continuing to invest to deliver 110,000 more affordable energy-efficient homes by 2032, and we will continue our work to tackle homelessness. We will also tackle fuel poverty for families by doubling our investment for the home energy Scotland loans and grants scheme to £42 million in 2022-23.

To enable us to break the cycle of poverty once and for all, we will also take actions to support the next generation to thrive. That includes continued investment in the Scottish attainment challenge and our young persons guarantee, and enhancing the total student support package over the next three years.

That gives a flavour of the significant and transformational actions that the Government will take forward through our delivery plan to give every child the best start and a bright future in Scotland. Our ambition, intention and policies will help us to achieve our ambitions for Scotland's children and families, but we have to work differently to improve the outcomes from our investment and make the impact that is needed. That will not happen overnight. It is about delivering whole-system change that is focused on providing integrated services and opportunities for families and helping them to flourish. It is the national mission that we talk about—it is for all of society to take forward.

Our partners have expressed their commitment to that ambitious work. We will seek to identify a small number of early adopters in the first year of the plan, supporting that phased approach with up to £5 million from our tackling child poverty fund, which will enable robust evaluation and learning to support scaling up the approach over the life of the plan. We will also scale up our investment in innovative approaches, building on the learning of our social innovation partnership to test and

accelerate approaches that bring together the support that families need to thrive.

In terms of reaching the interim targets, economic modelling cannot precisely account for what could happen, particularly in the context of the cost of living crisis, inflation rises and increasing international instability. However, current modelling, which we have published in full, projects that by 2023, the actions that we have taken to date, together with those that are set out in the plan, could help to deliver the lowest levels of child poverty in Scotland in the past 30 years and keep around 90,000 children out of poverty. Using current projections, we anticipate that, in 2023, more than 60,000 fewer children will live in relative poverty in comparison with when the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act was passed in 2017, with 17 per cent of children projected to live in relative poverty. We also anticipate that more than 50,000 fewer children will live in absolute poverty in comparison with 2017, with 16 per cent of children projected to live in absolute poverty in 2023.

I will be clear: we will not know for certain until data is available in 2025 whether we have met the targets. However, the Government will continue to consider further actions that may be required over the lifetime of the plan to achieve those targets, support families and break the cycle of poverty. That is why we have prioritised additional investment of more than £100 million in 2023-24 to provide immediate support to families and to drive forward the wider changes that are needed to address all three drivers of poverty reduction.

We want to ensure that everyone in Scotland has enough money to enable them to live with dignity, and that is why we have committed to begin work to deliver a minimum income guarantee for Scotland over the longer term. We cannot accept a future in which families have to choose between heating and eating and children are unable to access the essentials that they need to thrive. As a Parliament, we unanimously rejected that future in 2017 when we set our child poverty targets in statute, and we must reject it now.

We have already made such a difference together, and we must continue to do so. This is a plan for Scotland, and we must all work together to deliver on the national mission to end child poverty. The actions that I have set out today pave the way to 2030, putting the targets that have been set within our grasp. Our delivery plan establishes the action that is needed to deliver the best start and a bright future for families and children across Scotland, and I commend the plan to Parliament.

## Child Poverty

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

The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate on “Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-26”. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

15:47

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** As the cabinet secretary said in her statement, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 was passed unanimously by Parliament, setting a target to substantially reduce rates of child poverty in Scotland. It would be fair to say that we have not seen the progress that was expected or hoped for to deliver the reductions in child poverty that we all wanted to see. Indeed, since the bill was passed, many organisations have pointed to greater challenges that we face as a country. Nonetheless, eliminating child poverty must be a priority for us all.

I have to say at the outset that I have been disappointed by the Scottish Government’s approach to the plan. It has singularly failed to reach out across Parliament to develop the strategy or listen to ideas from other parties in the chamber, beyond the Green Party, on which it now relies for support. That is a decision that Scottish National Party and Green ministers are free to take, but it will leave the strategy all the poorer.

**Shona Robison:** Will Miles Briggs give way?

**Miles Briggs:** I do not have time at the moment.

New pressures on the cost of living, aggravated by the effects of successive lockdowns and the pandemic, such as rising food and fuel costs, now threaten to leave even more families impacted by, and living in, poverty. In 2019, 26 per cent of all children in Scotland were in relative poverty. In Glasgow, the number was as high as 32 per cent.

The Scottish child payment, which the Trussell Trust has identified as one of the forms of support that is most effective at addressing financial hardship, is welcome. Scottish Conservatives supported calls to double the payment, and I welcome the action that we have seen, as that targeted support is very important. However, our local authorities are often at the heart of action to support vulnerable families and have a critical role to play in helping to eliminate child poverty.

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):** Will the member give way?

**Miles Briggs:** Very briefly, because I do not have a huge amount of time.

**John Swinney:** I am grateful to Mr Briggs for giving way. His argument for the importance of the Scottish child payment is well made. Does he not think that he should follow it through and enable the payment by supporting the Government's budget, which he singularly failed to do earlier this year?

**Miles Briggs:** The reason why I did not support the Scottish Government budget was that it cut £250 million from local authorities. The cabinet secretary said in her statement that she wants to work in partnership with local authorities in Scotland. I do not see cutting their budget by £250 million as any partnership that I would want to be involved with. The decision by Green Party and SNP ministers to cut that funding will impact on child poverty and they should be acutely aware of that.

Creating better jobs and fairer job opportunities for families is incredibly important and I welcome what was outlined by the cabinet secretary. There is cross-party agreement on that.

In the time that I have, I want to concentrate on children in Scotland who are homeless and living in unsuitable and temporary accommodation. The housing emergency in Scotland is contributing to the level of child poverty, with children and families often stuck in unsuitable and unaffordable homes, or in temporary accommodation for unacceptable lengths of time. Families are being accommodated in former hotels and bed and breakfasts, and many have to share toilets with strangers and have to cook on toasters and kettles. That is totally unacceptable.

Across Scotland, more than 7,500 children are living in temporary accommodation and the typical length of stay for families in temporary accommodation has nearly doubled from what it was year ago to more than 58 weeks. Alison Watson of Shelter Scotland described the number of children in temporary accommodation as "a national disgrace" and I agree. A permanent safe home is vitally important for a child's wellbeing and development.

The number of children becoming homeless every year is equivalent to 32 Scottish children every day, which is equivalent to a primary school class. Homelessness has been shown to have long-term negative consequences for a child or young person's development. Children who have been homeless are three times more likely to experience mental health problems and their risk of ill health and disability is increased by up to 25 per cent. Any teacher will tell you that children who are living in temporary accommodation often struggle to maintain relationships and have increased anxiety.

SNP and Green ministers need to drive action on the issue. Bringing cases of living in temporary accommodation to an end for all children should have the full attention of the Government. I am sorry to say that all my efforts to engage on that issue with ministers and, indeed, the cabinet secretary have fallen on deaf ears.

Here in the capital, 1,500 children are living in temporary accommodation. The City of Edinburgh Council is being short-changed by £9 million due to a bureaucratic anomaly. The cabinet secretary has not listened to my calls for action to assist the council on that, but it is something that we need to see. Simply telling me to speak to the council is not good enough. SNP ministers cannot wash their hands of the housing crisis that is driving children into temporary accommodation here in the capital today.

Shelter Scotland stated in its briefing ahead of the debate:

"The 2022-2026 Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan must outline how the Scottish Government intends to get thousands of children out of temporary accommodation and unaffordable homes and out of poverty, and into safe, secure and affordable homes as a matter of priority."

I read the delivery plan before I came to the chamber and I found nothing new on the issue. We need to see a new approach and, if the cabinet secretary had consulted with other parties, I would have called for us to develop a plan that went further and banned the practice of children living in temporary and unsuitable accommodation. That could have been in the document, but I am sorry to say that it is not.

The negative impact that the pandemic has had on Scotland's children and young people is only now starting to be fully understood, but for the most vulnerable children and young people in our society we know that the impact has been significant. Realising the potential of every child and young person in Scotland is something that we must all see as a focus, but it is one that the strategy does not include.

One area that I believe needs urgent action is the long-term impact of lockdown on vulnerable children's learning. Long-term, system-wide support is required to help every child to catch up and recover from the educational disruption that there has been to both learning and child development. For the most vulnerable children that, again, will need targeted support.

We know that, prior to the pandemic, the Scottish Government was failing to close the attainment gap. What I would like to see, and ministers should be looking at, is where we can prioritise young people's education with the delivery of additional support through catch-up

schemes for disadvantaged children and young people. We have been calling for those.

It is clear that we need to see a cross-portfolio effort from Government to make progress on addressing child poverty and that targeted support is needed. I welcome the fact that the Deputy First Minister is participating in the debate, because I hope that he will be tasked with taking forward that work.

However, there are longer-term issues that we, as a Parliament and as a country, need to consider around intergenerational unemployment and the need to drive social mobility. The SNP set ambitious targets on child poverty five years ago, but we have not been able to meet those as a Parliament, and the Government has not been able to meet them with all the powers that it has. The strategy has presented an opportunity to genuinely consider refocusing that effort, and I hope that that is what we will see.

To conclude, it is critical that we hold the SNP-Green Government to account, as it is accountable to Parliament, and that we see ministers set out detailed plans around another strategy to reduce child poverty. We now need to see how that strategy will be delivered on the ground, and it is our work to ensure that ministers achieve what they are setting out to do.

We desperately need targeted resources, and we need ministers to outline what the tackling child poverty delivery plan will actually achieve and how councils will be given the resources to help implement it. I agree that we need cross-party work if we are going to meet those targets, and I hope that the Government will start working to live up to that too.

15:55

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I welcome the publication of the second tackling child poverty delivery plan and the uplift to the Scottish child payment, but that is not enough. It is not enough to erase the string of warnings from experts that a fiver will not be enough—it will not even get enough nappies for a week—or that we will not meet the targets.

We cannot do half measures when it comes to poverty, and we cannot keep rehashing old policies and presenting them as new. What the plan does not do in half measures however, is set out “plans to” or do “reviews of”. We needed—children in Scotland needed—more new ideas and concrete policies today, not plans to have them in the future. The cost of living crisis is with us now, and plans do not pay the bills.

Yesterday’s solutions will not fix today’s problems. I hear the cabinet secretary say that the Government is on track to meet its legal child poverty targets, but it cannot pat itself on the back for doing so. Let us not forget that members on these Labour benches, the third sector and colleagues across the chamber had to drag the Government kicking and screaming to double the Scottish child payment.

**John Swinney:** Pam Duncan-Glancy cannot get away with that remark, because the Scottish Labour Party, when the moment of truth came, voted against the Scottish child payment in the budget. It is pointless for the Scottish Labour Party to come to the chamber and engage in the debate to then vote against the payment when the moment of truth comes. That is hypocrisy.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** The Deputy First Minister understands parliamentary process far better than I do, as he has been here for longer. He will know that that is not a fair reflection on what happened. I simply do not have time today to go into all parts of the Government’s budget that caused us to vote against it, including the fact that it would not give £15 an hour to care workers. The Deputy First Minister knows that to be the case.

Civic society, think tanks, the third sector and academics have all lined up to help ministers in the SNP Government—even we, the Opposition, have tried to do their job for them. We have all set out a suite of options to reach the targets and to go further in order to ensure that we meet them, not just on a hope and a prayer, but by implementing measures that would ensure that, even on our worst day, with the worst outlook, we would get there.

Instead of taking the advice of experts on board, the Government has tinkered around the edges with small, piecemeal changes and rehashed policies rather than the bold and ambitious actions that are needed to radically improve the lives of children across Scotland.

**Shona Robison:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Is there time for a bit of slack?

**The Presiding Officer:** A little.

**Shona Robison:** Can Pam Duncan-Glancy not find it in herself to welcome a big, bold initiative—the mitigation of the benefit cap, which will lift thousands of children out of poverty and, for many families, will go well beyond the £40 Scottish child payment that she was advocating? Will she not welcome that?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** The cabinet secretary will remember that I said that I welcomed the child poverty delivery plan. However, I note that £10

million is associated with the mitigation of the benefit cap, and I believe that figure to be at least £6 million short. It would be good to see the modelling that the cabinet secretary has based that figure on so that we can understand it. There is also very little detail in the Government's plan on how it will mitigate the cap.

If, as the Government has suggested today, we meet the relative poverty interim targets, it will be by a small margin, which is a tragedy when we have the opportunity to do much more. The fact is that absolute poverty—that is, complete destitution—is set to still be at 16 per cent. That is around one in six children, which is nothing to be proud of. It represents inequality, and there is nothing in the plan to directly help families with babies under the age of one, one in three of whom are living in poverty, or black and minority ethnic families, 48 per cent of whom are in poverty. At a time when we need ambition and a Government that is hungry for change, the SNP-Green Government has given us nothing but complacency. One child in poverty is too many; one day is too long.

In the chamber, we have the habit of talking about child poverty in the abstract—numbers on a page and figures in a spreadsheet—but let us give those numbers a few names and faces.

That one child too many is Lukas, a 12-year-old boy in Glasgow. His dad, Symon, spends every single penny that he has with a purpose. Some of us in the chamber could go out to a restaurant or bar and spend £30, or possibly more. For Symon, that is his electricity for one week, so he does not have that luxury. He says:

"I watch how people just spend money on coffee, beer and food in cafes and bars. I would love that life."

Symon had to take Lukas out of school because he was being bullied and called a skank by other children. That is too often the reality of children who live in poverty.

That one child is the child whose mother could not afford appropriate winter clothing for herself or her child. Another parent noticed and referred her to social services, leading her to feel that she had failed her own children. She had not; this Government had. Thankfully, Glasgow's No.1 Baby & Family Support Service, which is a lifeline service in Glasgow, was able to help her to get winter clothing and essentials to keep her going. However, let us bear in mind that that is a third sector organisation that has been handed a £1 million cut in next year's budget. Not only is it stepping up and stepping in where the Government is failing, it is not getting the thanks that it needs.

That one child is a little girl from Govanhill. At the weekends, she sees her dad, who lives on £60

a month after bills. He is having to raid the cupboards of his dead dad to find food to feed his little girl when she visits his home, which is freezing because he cannot afford to heat it. That young man does not know what he will do when the cupboards are bare; he cannot afford to restock them.

I say to the Government that it must not come to the chamber with pride; instead, we need humility. I welcome the further increase to the Scottish child payment, but we cannot ignore the fact that it took too long to raise the payment to £20 in the first place. It took so long that, although the Government stands here today telling us that it will increase the payment to £25, some families are still waiting for their payment to reach £20—that will not even happen until April and it should have happened sooner.

As the Government has so far failed to implement the full roll-out of the payment for the over-sixes, 150,000 children on bridging payments will not get the increase at all.

**The Presiding Officer:** Please conclude, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** The Government has given no indication that it intends to uprate bridging payments, either. Over the next two years, we must have cast-iron action that will take us up to and well past our 2030 target. More of the same will not cut it. That is why Scottish Labour has launched its child poverty commission.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** We need more ambition. The time for bold action was long ago. We cannot wait and we cannot rely on tinkering around the edges.

16:02

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I am pleased to speak for the Scottish Liberal Democrats in this important debate on tackling child poverty.

Author Anthony Horowitz once wrote:

"Childhood, after all, is the first precious coin that poverty steals from a child."

It has been four years since the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 set the target of fewer than 18 per cent of children living in relative poverty by 2024. However, in recent years, the child poverty rate has increased in Scotland. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned that the Government is at risk of missing the target, which was agreed unanimously by this Parliament.

The Government's figures show that more than one in four of Scotland's children are officially



recognised as living in poverty. That equates to around 260,000 children. In 2022, in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, that figure is unacceptable. It is even more shameful when we note the fact that 68 per cent of children in poverty live in working households, 29 per cent of children with a disabled family member are in poverty and 38 per cent of children in poverty are in lone parent households.

Numerous studies have found that children who grow up in poverty experience many disadvantages that can have a negative impact on their health and significant social consequences. Those effects are felt both during childhood and well into adulthood. There is a significant impact on health outcomes, educational attainment and even cognitive development.

It should go without saying that every child has the right to safety and warmth, a roof over their head and food in their belly. It is important to say that poverty is not just about a lack of money. All too often it means that children are excluded from everyday activities and opportunities that are vital to their development, happiness and mental wellbeing and that children from more privileged backgrounds are able to benefit from.

What should be done? Everyone, no matter where they come from or what family they were born into, deserves the opportunity to build a good life for themselves. In modern Scotland, every parent should know that they have the means to provide such an environment for their children. Everyone deserves to be paid a fair wage, to afford a home, and to be able to use good public services, but for too many people, that is far from the reality, and that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. All this is happening even before the cost of living crisis has started to take hold. The impact on low-income households, and the knock-on effect on children who are already living in poverty could be catastrophic.

Put simply, it is the duty of the Government to do everything in its power to alleviate the crisis and to move towards a Scotland that is free of child poverty as soon as is humanly possible. The Scottish Liberal Democrats believe that that will start with the Government reversing its planned £250 million cut to councils that will inevitably force them to raise council tax, and heap yet more pressure on low-income families.

The 3.8 per cent rise in rail fares should also be cancelled and disability benefits boosted. It is welcome that the Scottish Government is implementing a 6 per cent increase to a number of Scottish social security benefits from April. It is, however, not going far enough with disability benefits, which are being raised by just 3.1 per cent. That is 3 per cent less than the figure for inflation that was announced yesterday, and

potentially 5 per cent less than the inflation figure that experts are predicting.

**Shona Robison:** Can the member find it in herself to welcome any aspect of the plan, particularly the mitigation of the benefit cap, which was, after all, introduced under the Lib Dem and Tory coalition in 2013? I have announced today that it will be mitigated fully, as far as we can do so under devolved powers. Does the member welcome that?

**Beatrice Wishart:** I would welcome any plans that tackled child poverty.

The result of what I have outlined is that thousands of people will be hit directly in their pockets, and more people will be pushed into poverty. That is simply not good enough for thousands of families across Scotland. It is certainly not good enough for the 29 per cent of impoverished children with a disabled family member, who I mentioned earlier.

I will finish by speaking about the crossover that can often exist between childhood poverty and mental health. It is often teachers who notice that something is wrong with the home life, and it can be the case that parental mental ill-health is at the root of the situation. There are countless reasons why families can find themselves in a situation in which children and parents are going hungry, including the delays that are built into universal credit, insecure work and having no recourse to public funds. There are clear links between mental ill-health and poverty, which is why improvement in the provision of mental health services in Scotland is something that we have always prioritised and highlighted.

Childhood should be a time to explore the world, to learn, grow and play, all while secure in the knowledge that things are going to be okay, that there will always be food on the table, and a warm, safe place to call home. That should be the case for every child in this country, and we must all endeavour to make it so.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We now move to the open debate, and I call Elena Whitham, who joins us remotely, to be followed by Alexander Stewart. Ms Whitham, you have up to six minutes.

16:48

**Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** Before I embark on my speech in support of the Scottish Government's efforts to tackle child poverty, I want to put a human face to what we are discussing here today. As a child, I had to face poverty twice in my life before the age of nine. The extreme downturn in Scotland's manufacturing fortunes meant that we became economic migrants in 1980, when, at the young

age of 23, my parents packed me and my two-year-old brother into a jumbo jet bound for Canada at Prestwick airport.

Christmas of 1982 is also seared into my consciousness, as my father had been made redundant and my mother started to work nights in a doughnut shop to make ends meet. The ends never met, and, on that Christmas day, I watched as my mum struggled to make us a meal from the food parcel that we had received from the food bank. With Christmas cartoons on in the background, she served us homemade rice pudding for Christmas dinner with tears rolling down her cheeks as my wee brother pushed it away in disgust. At eight years old, I already knew the immense pressure my parents were under, and I cajoled him into eating the hated rice pudding, as there was nothing else to be had.

That period of food insecurity has affected my relationship with food throughout my entire life. It was a time when, in the absence of free school meals, my mum tried her best to ensure that I had something nutritious to accompany the flask of hot, sugary tea in my lunchbox. I was hyperaware that we were struggling and tried to hide my lunch from my classmates. There will be others in this place who also experienced childhood hunger and deep-seated, poverty-induced worry, and it is up to us to bring that lived experience with us as we make decisions that will have a lasting impact on our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

As we stand on the precipice of a growing and deepening cost of living crisis, my heart is again filled with dread and worry for those children whose struggles are going to multiply and for those weans who will experience their first encounter with poverty despite their parents' best efforts and despite the efforts of the SNP Government, which has made it a national mission to turn the tide on centuries of child poverty despite having one hand tied behind its back. Nowhere else on these islands do we see the equivalent of our game-changing Scottish child payment, which is set to be doubled from April and to which an extra £5 is now set to be added by the end of this year. When that is combined with our three best start grants and our best start foods scheme, families will have £10,000 invested in their first child by the Government by the time they turn six. If a family has the dreaded bedroom tax looming over them, we will make sure that that is mitigated, too, which will free up much-needed family income for necessities and help them to secure their home. We are also committed to continuing to build affordable homes faster than anywhere else in the UK as we seek to realise our aim of ending homelessness and its traumatic impacts.

The Child Poverty Action Group's recent report highlights that, by the time a child is 16, Scottish Government interventions will have reduced the cost of raising that child by 31 per cent—a huge £24,000—despite the UK Tory Government's implementation of savage welfare cuts, including the short-sighted removal of the £20 universal credit uplift and the regrettable benefit cap, which includes the abhorrent requirement that women disclose rape trauma in order to secure much-needed money for their third child. That tells us everything that we need to know about the Conservatives' approach to tackling child poverty.

The inaction of the chancellor in yesterday's spring statement further underlines their total disregard for those families who are most at risk from the volatility of our present situation. If a family cannot afford to top up their prepayment meter or buy enough food, they cannot benefit from the removal of VAT on solar panels. It is a great shame that the chancellor did not follow our lead and uprate social security by 6 per cent, choosing instead to pander to his base. That should be contrasted with the approach of the Scottish Government that has been set out today, which will involve the investment of £10 million per year to mitigate the benefit cap, which disproportionately impacts on lone parents. Surely, that move is welcomed across the chamber.

When my son was a toddler, we struggled to move from benefits back into work, as the transition period meant huge financial hardship for the first few months. Therefore, I am really pleased that today's announcement shows that the Scottish Government also understands those pressures and that, in 2022-23, it will invest up to £15 million in a new fund to tackle the financial barriers that parents face when they enter the labour market, especially when they do so for the first time.

As the convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I want to ensure the maximum uptake of our devolved benefits, and I will work on a cross-party basis to ensure that all families who are entitled to help receive it. That could include creating a system that makes automatic awards across social security and local authority payments, which would involve clothing grants and free school meals tying in with the Scottish child payment. The Scottish welfare fund also plays a huge role in tackling poverty that is caused by crisis situations, and I will work to ensure that it is funded and equitable across local authority areas.

All our wee yins deserve the best start and the brightest of futures, and we must do all that we can to support them. I therefore welcome the cabinet secretary's statement and our updated strategy, which calls on all of us in the public,

private and voluntary sectors to work collectively in this most important of endeavours. Imagine what we could do if we were a normal, everyday, common-or-garden independent country with all the levers.

16:14

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am pleased to contribute to a debate about an issue that is of fundamental importance. I welcome the publication of the “Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26”, and I look forward to closely scrutinising its content and the progress that is made on it over the years.

Few issues in politics will attract as much agreement on their importance as tackling child poverty. The issue of poverty more generally is frequently discussed, but we know that child poverty carries with it a set of particular concerns. The unfortunate truth is that a child who grows up in poverty is more likely to suffer problems with their emotional and cognitive development, and those problems may continue into adulthood.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 received unanimous support in this Parliament and enshrined in law a number of child poverty targets. That was clearly considered a priority in 2017, but the events of the past two years have shone an entirely different light on this important issue. We know that the pandemic has created further challenges in tackling child poverty, but analysis by the Fraser of Allander Institute suggests that we will not know the full extent of the damage for a number of years. Consequently, there has perhaps never been more uncertainty about how we can make progress in tackling child poverty.

Unfortunately, the most recent figures suggest that absolute child poverty is 17 per cent higher than the target and that it continues to rise. We also know that, before the pandemic, the number of children involved in homelessness applications was increasing. Shelter Scotland recently described the number of children in temporary accommodation as “a national disgrace”.

I am hopeful that the measures that have been put in place will be effective in driving down child poverty. We acknowledge the doubling of the Scottish child payment, which we repeatedly called for, and I was delighted to see that in this year’s budget.

Childcare provision is another important component in fighting and challenging child poverty. Conservatives supported the decision to introduce 30 hours per week of free childcare across all local authorities, and it was a positive step to see that policy finally put in place in August 2021. There is still much more to do to ensure that those childcare hours are available and that

parents can depend on them. The “funding follows the child” approach was the correct one to base the policy on, but there are still some parents who find it difficult to access that. I therefore urge the SNP-Green Government to do more to ensure that the policy is finally able to realise its potential to drive down child poverty.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** You have outlined a number of Scottish Government moves that you support. A lot of great work is going on, and your party talks continuously about Scotland’s two Governments. Can you explain what the Government in England did yesterday to help tackle child poverty in Scotland?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Please speak through the chair, Mr Fairlie.

**Alexander Stewart:** The broad shoulders of financial support from the UK Government have gone miles towards ensuring that funding continues to come to Scotland. That will trickle down to ensure that everyone across Scotland is given funding to support them.

Other measures, such as the introduction of universal free school meals in primary schools, will also help in that process. It is, however, regrettable that the Scottish Government will not be implementing the policy in full by August this year, as was originally planned.

Despite such measures, analysis suggests that, by 2023-24, relative child poverty will still be as much as 4 per cent higher than the interim target of 18 per cent. So, although we may see a certain amount of progress on the issue in the coming years, it is unlikely that that progress will be completely satisfactory. I therefore urge the SNP-Green Government to leave no stone unturned in attempting to meet both the interim and primary targets of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017.

Doing that will include listening to recommendations from the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which has called for the Government to reduce barriers to employment and to ensure that a job guarantee is provided for families. Higher rates of employment are associated with lower rates of child poverty and higher levels of educational attainment. However, the Scottish Government’s record in that area is not something to be proud of. Last year, Audit Scotland reported that there is still much more work to do to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Recent reforms to pupil equity funding have massive implications for local authorities and are unlikely to close the attainment gap. It may even be widened. Those reforms include the removal of £800,000 of funding from Clackmannanshire, in my region. The Government needs to go back to

the drawing board on that issue to ensure that every child is given the chance to succeed, regardless of their background.

In conclusion, there might well be some way to go before the 2030 targets that are set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 are due to be met, but that fact does not make the need to meet them any less urgent. Action is required to meet those targets, and, over the coming years, Conservatives will work actively to ensure that any issues are raised. We will also constructively support measures that take things forward. I will ensure that we scrutinise what happens in relation to need, because it is vital that we support every child to reach their full potential, come out of poverty and break that cycle.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Natalie Don, who joins us remotely.

16:20

**Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP):** I am proud of the actions that Scotland is taking to tackle child poverty and of the further measures announced by the cabinet secretary today, which I know will have a real impact on people's lives. However, I will not be content until every child in Scotland is free from the grip of poverty. Every child deserves the right to three meals a day, every child deserves a warm home, every child deserves to have a decent standard of living—and that is the bare minimum. Every child also deserves to enjoy their childhood and not be dragged down by the stigma and the anxiety that poverty inevitably brings.

Child poverty is set only to worsen because of the cost of living crisis that we are now experiencing. Food bills are rising rapidly, and that alone will result in more families making difficult choices. The reliance on food banks will only increase. Energy price hikes, according to the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, will cause direct debit customers to see their bills soar by an average of £693 and prepayment customers to see an increase of £708 a year.

Breaking that down to a minimum of about £57 per month, I honestly do not know how people are going to manage. We are predicted to see a huge increase in levels of debt among people who struggle with those bills, and for those on prepayment meters, we could see people going without electricity for days. If any members do not know what it is like to wake up and get ready for school on a cold morning when your power has run out, let me tell them: it ain't fun. That is only going to become a more regular occurrence for children in all our constituencies.

Today we have heard about some of the increased measures that the Scottish Government

has taken to address child poverty. However, I genuinely fear that, no matter what policies we implement and no matter how much money we invest for the children in our country, it will always be counteracted by the cruel Tory Government policies that are implemented at Westminster. The audacity of some of the Opposition members in this chamber just blows me away.

Coming during one of the biggest crises that our people have faced, yesterday's spring statement was a chance for the Tories to take a different path. They could have scrapped the 10 per cent national insurance hike. They could have followed the SNP's lead and uprated benefits by 6 per cent, matched the SNP's Scottish child payment and made it UK-wide, and in turn given Scotland additional financial resources to protect and increase our spending on social security. They could have reversed the cut to universal credit, reversed the decision to scrap the triple lock, and introduced a windfall tax on energy companies' excessive profits and put that money back into the pockets of people who are struggling to keep the lights on. Instead, they did nothing.

Parliaments should aim to be representative of society, but, at Westminster, 29 per cent of MPs are privately educated, compared with just 7 per cent of the general population. How can we possibly expect those MPs to understand the hardships that are faced by working families, when more than a quarter of them have been brought up completely sheltered from working-class and impoverished families? How can we expect those same people to have the slightest inkling as to what those families experience on a daily basis? Perhaps the UK chancellor could take a minute away from one of his luxury villas or fancy yachts and come to my constituency and live on the money that he is expecting our children to live on. He would not last five minutes, I am sure.

The United Nations has openly condemned the UK Government for its austerity agenda, which blatantly targets those that need our help the most. Meanwhile, we have Tories who have the brass neck to smile for photos at our food banks. Do they realise that it is their fault that those continue to exist at all? They have the powers to end food poverty right now so that no child or parent has to go through that experience.

Over the past decade or so, food banks have become normalised in our society, but they are not normal and never should be, because they are a failure of the UK political system. I have focused on the Conservative Party in relation to food banks today, but I should give an honourable mention to the Liberal Democrats, who propped up the austerity agenda and got into bed with a Conservative Government. Of course, we cannot forget our friends in the Labour Party who, when in

government, brought food banks into existence in the first place.

In Scotland, the SNP is doing what we can to protect children. For example, the devolution of the child disability payment will mean that we have a system in Scotland that will ensure that children who are entitled to CDP are treated with dignity and respect. However, as with all other devolved social security measures, we are at the mercy of Tory fiscal decision making. If the Tories choose to slash spending on social security, that will directly impact the financial resources that Scotland has available, and we can only do so much to mitigate that without the full fiscal powers of independence.

If the Scottish Tories have any credibility left, they will go back to their chancellor in London and implore him to deliver the policies and reverse the cuts and national insurance hike, as the SNP has called for. It is not too late for them to do so.

If Westminster is not prepared to take action, it should devolve the necessary powers to Scotland, so that we have the fiscal autonomy to deal with the issue. Better yet, Westminster should not stand in Scotland's way when this Parliament calls for an independence referendum. I suspect that the Opposition members will be rolling their eyes at that, but it is time that they wake up to the reality.

The only way that we can protect Scotland's future and our children is by having the levers that every other independent country possesses. With those powers, we could ensure that child poverty in Scotland becomes something that is present only in history books.

Our Scottish Government is doing all that it can, within its powers and resources, to tackle child poverty, and the policies and steps that are laid out in the child poverty action plan will be crucial. However, the true powers to address child poverty remain with Westminster, and I look forward to the day when, once and for all, an independent Scotland puts an end to child poverty and poverty in all its forms.

16:26

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is my view that the overarching priority of the Scottish Parliament should be to tackle, reduce and eradicate child poverty.

Child poverty is a huge challenge that faces our country. It limits opportunity for children in every town and deepens the inequalities that already exist in our society, from the second that the child is born. It should shame us all that child poverty remains as prevalent as it does in our country today. We stand in this chamber, week in and week out, discussing the modern, inclusive and

progressive Scotland that we think exists when, in reality, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, between 2017 and 2020, almost one in four children were living in relative poverty and more than one in five children were living in absolute poverty. That is nothing short of a national disgrace and we must redouble our efforts to address it every day. Figures like that represent not just a number but a dark and difficult reality for so many children and their families across Scotland. It is unjust and unacceptable, and we in this chamber must do all that we can to fix it.

Therefore, we must look at the dilemma that faces parents today. They bring their children up in a Scotland where the richest continue to own the wealth, while those who are most deprived in our most deprived areas work on low wages in order to create that wealth. That is not a modern, inclusive or progressive Scotland; it is far from it. It is, in fact, representative of a Scotland that has two Governments—at Holyrood and Westminster—that are bereft of ideas and often focused on other matters. I say to the SNP and the Conservatives—think again, because it is only when every child does well that we will all do well.

**The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson):** In a constructive manner and on the basis of what she has just said, would Carol Mochan support more powers coming to this Parliament over taxes such as capital gains and inheritance tax, so that we could start to realise some of the wealth in Scotland in a more progressive way? Without those powers, we are very limited in some of the things that we can do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, Ms Mochan.

**Carol Mochan:** Thank you.

Ben Macpherson will understand that I believe that we should use the powers that we have and that we should be open to the fact that the whole economy should run in a different way, in order to benefit those in society who need the most from us.

I say again to the SNP and the Conservatives: think again. It is only when every child does well that we will all do well. There is enough wealth and resources to ensure bread and roses for everyone. What is lacking is the political will of Governments to make it happen. To not think like that is to let down those who have been impacted for decades by poor policy decisions and lack of radical thought.

I want to be clear from the outset that I deplore the Tory Government attacks on working-class people. The Tories are the friends of the rich and show no interest in redistributing wealth to those most in need. That was only reaffirmed by

yesterday's spring statement by the chancellor, which tinkers around the edges and fails to recognise the scale of the cost of living crisis, and instead puts more financial pressure on working families and makes it more difficult to alleviate the situation of children in poverty. Our children, our communities and the entire country deserve so much more.

However, as an MSP here in this chamber at this moment in time, it is my job to hold this Scottish Government to account, and I ask it to do more. I ask it whether it is doing absolutely everything that it can do to eradicate child poverty. I ask the back benchers whether, at every opportunity, they ask their front-bench members to do more.

Members should not just listen to me, but listen to the Trussell Trust and Save the Children and their report, "Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution". I will give some consideration to the policies that they believe the Scottish Government needs to take forward to tackle child poverty targets.

Although a commitment to increase the Scottish child payment—after several months of intense pressure from Scottish Labour—is welcome, as is today's announcement of an increase to £25 before the end of the year, I ask the Scottish Government to listen to us once again and double the Scottish child payment from £20 to £40 by April next year. I will go on to say why it should do that.

Amid a cost of living crisis for many, the likes of which we have never seen before, it is absolutely pivotal that those most in need are supported financially to put food on the table and ensure that, despite the difficulties placed on all of us by the pandemic and the immediate cost of living crisis, the Scottish Government's child poverty targets are met. That is what we all want.

We know that the Scottish child payment contributes massively towards tackling child poverty, and it alleviates pressure on families in receipt of it, but we cannot ignore the fact that, even with the progress made, the payment's roll-out has to be quicker and more effectively targeted, and the amount of the payment has to increase further. Although the Scottish Government has come forward with an optimistic prediction today, many organisations believe that failure to deliver that will likely lead to the Scottish Government's failure to meet some of its child poverty targets. It is unacceptable to even take that chance.

If the Scottish Government is going to tackle child poverty properly, surely its priority must be to listen to the experts, work with precision and purpose, and deliver the changes needed to

alleviate the barriers of poverty, which hinder so many children. I remind the Government that that starts by ending the incessant cuts to local government.

Scottish Labour's plan to address this huge challenge is clear: increase the child payment, invest in local services, tackle the cost of living crisis, show ambition and show strategy for that ambition. I believe that the SNP-Green Government wants to do something about child poverty, but it is up to it to decide whether it will actually do everything that it can. Scottish Labour will always be on the side of working families and those living in poverty. Again, I say to SNP and Green back benchers: come and join us and call on the Scottish Government to use all the might of the Scottish Parliament in tackling the number 1 priority—to save thousands of children from the dire impact of poverty.

16:33

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Eradicating child poverty has been declared a national mission by the Scottish Government, and it must be a mission for us all. As we have seen during the pandemic, it is often the most vulnerable who suffer the most, and with rising fuel, food and housing costs, that mission requires urgent action now more than ever. I welcome the cabinet secretary's remarks that the current cost of living crisis and international uncertainty have strengthened the Government's resolve to work across society.

I also welcome the actions that were laid out in the statement: increasing the Scottish child payment to £25, which is five times the initial amount, and extending it to all under-16s at the end of the year; increasing employment services and supporting up to 12,000 parents into fair and sustainable work; introducing the new £15 million fund to tackle financial barriers to work; and taking steps to mitigate the UK Government's benefit cap.

The development of the delivery plan identified a range of priority groups among which, as the evidence shows, the prevalence of child poverty is higher: households with a disabled parent or child; minority ethnic households; larger families; lone parents; mothers under 25; and families with a child under one year of age. People's lives do not fit neatly into boxes and, inevitably, there will be many people who have more than one of those vulnerabilities. All those groups will benefit from the actions that have been outlined. Doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 in April, then increasing it to £25, is an example of real action that makes a difference to families, especially children, and it underlines the Scottish Government's commitment on this matter. When

we can, getting cash into the hands of those who need it is crucial, and it is the most dignified approach. Families themselves know what they need.

I have heard the line a few times from Opposition members—admittedly not in this debate, but this week—that there is not a constitutional solution to the cost of living crisis. Of course, simply having the power and the responsibility does not mean that a Government will tackle poverty and inequality. We see that at Westminster, where, yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not use every lever and resource at his hands to protect and support families. However, no one serious can fail to acknowledge that the actions of our Scottish Government are being undermined by the UK Government's austerity. Combined with a deeply damaging £20 cut to universal credit, the constant need to mitigate the actions of the Conservative Government to protect our citizens means that investment made to alleviate policies such as the obscene bedroom tax is money that is spent to stand still.

I have greater ambition for my country than simply reducing the worst harms caused by a Tory Government—a Government that Scotland did not vote for. We can see the difference. Better choices can be made here, even under the current set-up.

**Miles Briggs:** The relationship that the member describes is also the relationship between the Scottish Government and councils, so the decision that her Government took to cut £250 million from council budgets will also have an impact. Does she not accept that?

**Ruth Maguire:** We are operating in challenging times. The Scottish Government's budget has been cut. We have outlined a number of areas in which the Government is taking action. I have just said that one of the most important things that we can do is to put money directly into the pockets of families who are affected.

Until we have the full powers and responsibility of independence, we will have to work with one hand tied behind our back. Despite that, the Scottish Government is maximising incomes and providing support through devolved social security powers, with the eight Scottish social security benefits being increased by 6 per cent from 1 April. That will go some way in helping the most vulnerable with the cost of living crisis.

Of the almost £6 billion that has been invested over the past three years to support low-income households across Scotland, more than a third—about £2.18 billion—has directly benefited children. The benefit take-up strategy is crucial, too. Despite what some of the nastier commentators might have us believe, a lot of

people are not claiming their full entitlement. I know that to be true from my casework. Income maximisation is an important offering in a lot of our community organisations, but I particularly acknowledge the work of North Ayrshire Council's money matters team. In the past two years, it has helped North Ayrshire residents to secure £30 million in state benefits—money that those citizens are entitled to, and money that is, more often than not, spent in the local economy.

Social security alone is not the answer. We need continued, focused action from other parts of the Government to contribute to meeting targets. Housing is crucial. Rent payments are the single biggest cost for many households, and year-on-year increases from social landlords squeeze family budgets that are already stretched. I know that the cabinet secretary agrees that we must ensure that affordable housing in Scotland is truly affordable, and I look forward to hearing about the work that the Scottish Government is doing in that regard.

Bringing together policies on economic development, transport, skills and childcare provision, with a focus on knocking down barriers to employment, would be a hugely powerful and effective approach. I know that there are limitations on what the Scottish Government can do to improve job quality in the private sector, but the commitments in the national strategy for economic transformation to improve wages and conditions in sectors such as leisure, hospitality, early learning and childcare, through central fair work agreements, provide a very welcome focus. No one action in isolation can make the scale of difference that we need, but with direct efforts to get more cash into the pockets of families now and action on economic development, transport, skills, childcare and other family supports, we can make a difference to families now and make real progress on sustained poverty reduction.

16:40

**Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The challenge of tackling child poverty in Scotland is immense and incredibly important. Families and communities still reeling from the impact of the Covid pandemic are now being hit hard by the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the resulting cost of living crisis. That will only add to the acute problems faced by the families and children who endure life in poverty.

The problem has increased in recent years. The Poverty and Inequality Commission report in January highlighted that the percentage of children living in relative poverty has increased from 21 per cent a decade ago to 24 per cent now. We can all agree that tackling such issues must be an urgent priority for all parties across Parliament. Therefore,

we welcome the publication of the tackling child poverty delivery plan today. There is much in it that we can support. We welcome the doubling of the child payment to £20 and the plan to increase it to £25 over time, and we support the extension of free school meals to all primary school pupils. We have been calling for those measures.

In addition to those measures, we welcome yesterday's spring statement from the chancellor, which delivers additional support for low-income households, including an increase to the national insurance threshold—a move that has been described by the consumer expert Martin Lewis as a big boon to those on low incomes.

The chancellor also announced a doubling of the household support fund to £1 billion, which will result in an extra £45 million in Barnett consequential to the Scottish Government to support struggling families. The reduction in the rate of income tax announced yesterday will deliver an additional £350 million to the Scottish Government budget, and I look forward to hearing from the cabinet secretary or the Deputy First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has for that additional funding.

All those steps from the Scottish and UK Governments are welcome and will make a difference, but, as we know, much more still needs to be done to tackle the long-term challenges of child poverty. In order to address that long-term, society-wide problem, we need to understand where the powers reside to deal with the issue. The cabinet secretary said in her statement that the powers and budget available to the Scottish Government are limited, but I remind her that extensive welfare powers were devolved to the Scottish Parliament in the Scotland Act 2016. The Scottish Government could use those welfare powers now—I appreciate that some are being used to create additional benefits to target vulnerable families.

**Ben Macpherson:** Does the member recognise that 12 benefits are now being delivered, seven of which are new? The devolution of powers in the Scotland Act 2016 did not include a majority of the low-income benefits in the social security system; those continue to reside with the UK Government. Is the member as disappointed as many people are, including Martin Lewis, whom he cited, that there was zero action from the chancellor on low-income benefits? That is a disgrace.

**Dean Lockhart:** On Ben Macpherson's final point, in relation to the organisations that he mentioned, he is ultimately saying that more money should be available in the Scottish budget to tackle child poverty. I agree with that and, shortly, I will explain the real reason why that money is not available in the Scottish budget.

The Scottish Government has received record funding from the UK Government. Last year, the chancellor announced an extra £4.6 billion for the Scottish Government, which made it the largest overall budget, and the largest budget increase, in the history of devolution. However—here is the point that directly addresses Ben Macpherson's question—this year's Scottish budget will involve a negative adjustment of £200 million entirely as a result of economic growth being slower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. In other words, the Scottish budget is losing £200 million, which could have been spent on alleviating child poverty, because of the SNP's inability to keep pace with economic growth elsewhere in the UK. That is the reality, Mr Macpherson.

While we are talking about lost money and lost opportunity, we heard yesterday of another £250 million being wasted on two ferries that might never see the light of day. I will not go into a longer catalogue of mismanagement by the Scottish Government, but that is a total of £450 million that would have made a huge difference to struggling families and would have been available to spend in the Scottish budget but for the SNP's incompetence.

**Ben Macpherson:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Dean Lockhart:** I am afraid not. I have a lot to cover, and my time is short.

I want to touch on the underlying causes of long-term poverty. It is absolutely right that we talk about the consequences of long-term poverty, but its long-term underlying causes include unemployment, low wages for unskilled workers and the education gap, and those underlying causes have not been properly addressed. Levels of job creation and employment in Scotland are far behind those in other areas in the UK. Inactivity rates are much higher and wages are lower in Scotland. Some 150,000 college places have been cut under the Scottish Government. Those places were most likely to help low-paid workers to retrain and get better jobs. As we have heard, local government budgets have been slashed by £250 million this year. After 15 years of the SNP being in power, the education attainment gap has not been addressed. There are almost 2,000 fewer teachers in schools, and the shortage is particularly severe in deprived areas.

**John Swinney:** Where does the member get his facts?

**Dean Lockhart:** I say to Mr Swinney that those are facts. He knows that they are facts. All those negative factors result in a long-term cycle of negative outcomes and multigenerational poverty. *[Interruption.]* I say to Mr Swinney that I am talking



about the underlying causes, which the SNP has had 15 years to deal with.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Swinney, if you want to make an intervention that is not from a sedentary position, I will allow Mr Lockhart to have additional time.

**John Swinney:** Does Mr Lockhart not realise that his comments are somewhat thin on constructive ideas about how the Government's plans could be advanced and enhanced? *[Interruption.]* Mr Briggs is going on about our not consulting. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government consulted everybody, including Parliament. What stopped the Tories or Mr Lockhart making a constructive suggestion this afternoon that would break the monotony from Tory members?

**Dean Lockhart:** I suggest that Mr Swinney should read our manifesto. The point of my comments is to address the distorted reality and narrative that we hear from the SNP that child poverty and all the other problems are the fault of someone else—that someone else is to blame—whereas the reality is that the Scottish Government has the powers at its disposal and the budget. I have highlighted that, but for the Scottish Government's incompetence, £450 million would be available to tackle child poverty.

I will conclude. We welcome—constructively—all measures to address child poverty. The reality is that the SNP has the powers, the resources and the budget available to make a difference, and it has had 15 years to address the underlying causes of poverty, which I have outlined. However, on all those counts, the SNP is failing to deliver.

16:47

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** In his withering assessment of the impact of the UK Government's policies on extreme poverty, Philip Alston of the United Nations called poverty "a political choice." It is a choice. It was a choice when the UK Government cut off child tax credit support for families who have more than two children while spending a quarter of a billion pounds on a new royal yacht, and it was a choice yesterday to cut fuel duty by 5 per cent, inflate the profit margins of fossil fuel corporations and make it cheaper for the rich to drive gas guzzlers, with no effect on the millions of low-income families with no access to a car.

Where have those choices got us? According to the latest data, 24 per cent of our children—240,000 of them—are in poverty.

If poverty is a choice, we can choose differently. That is what the Scottish Parliament was set up to

do: to make different and better choices for Scotland.

"Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026", which was published today, is not a perfect plan, but it should give us confidence that we will make progress towards a Scotland that is free from child poverty and meet the targets that Parliament set itself five years ago. The pledge to increase the Scottish child payment to £25 is welcome, and I was pleased to hear that it is now part of an additional £10,000 per first child within the initial six years of a child's life.

However, we must be constantly alive to new opportunities to use the social security system to reduce child poverty. As we have seen from the several fairly rapid increases in the child payment and the cabinet secretary's assurance that they will lift 50,000 children out of poverty, it is a powerful tool. We need to keep exploring how it can be used even more. The Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland has estimated that disability and lone parent premiums of £10 a week added on to the payment would lift an additional 20,000 children out of poverty. I know that the cabinet secretary will keep that and similar proposals under active consideration.

However, to be frank, extra entitlements are useless if people are not supported to claim them. Too many households still do not claim what they are entitled to, whether because they have been put off by decades of denigration of benefit claimants from successive UK Governments of all colours or because they simply are not aware of what they can receive. Therefore, it is good that a substantive part of the plan focuses on income maximisation. For instance, there will be social security training for all health visitors by the end of 2024 to ensure that all new parents have access to money advice if they need it. Reaffirmation of the commitment to placing money advisers in up to 150 general practices in some of Scotland's most deprived areas is also very welcome.

The benefit cap is a fundamental distortion of our social security system. It draws an entirely arbitrary limit on household entitlement, regardless of need. In effect, the UK Government pays households even less than its own assessment says they require to meet basic needs. On average, families lose £235 a month, but some lose far more: 15 per cent of capped families lose out on more than £400 a month and recent figures show that 10 Scots families are losing between £900 and £1,000 a month. Worst of all, the cap laser targets children for cuts, as the vast majority of affected households have at least one child. Because most of the households that are impacted are lone parent families and such families experience a poverty rate 14 per cent

higher than the average, it is imperative that we do all that we can to mitigate the impact of the cap.

In a recent report, the Child Poverty Action Group estimates that scrapping the benefit cap, which only the UK Government can do in full, would lift 175,000 children out of poverty across the UK. Even the architect of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which introduced the cap, David Freud, has called for it to be abolished. Greens have raised that point in Parliament and with the Scottish Government for many years, including through the co-operation agreement, so I am pleased to see a commitment in the plan to mitigate the benefit cap as much as possible, backed by £10 million.

Thousands of families are hit by the benefit cap right now. We should aim to find every last one of them and get them the support to which they are entitled. Along with the new system of rent controls that is being designed by Greens in government and will take effect during the lifetime of the plan, action against the benefit cap is an important part of the new deal for renters that the Greens also champion.

The Greens welcome the delivery plan. I thank Shona Robison and others for the constructive conversations that we have had about it up to this point. It is not a perfect plan. For example, I would have liked more focus on what more we can do to support people who are impacted by the UK Government's cruel no recourse to public funds regime. I think that we will see additional asks on that as the crisis in Ukraine worsens.

Although the Scottish Government projects that the interim target for relative poverty reduction will be met and exceeded, which is welcome, the projections state that the absolute poverty target will be missed. That shows how much more work we have to do, but it is clear from the plan that we are choosing a different Scotland: one that redistributes wealth to support people on low incomes, not one that grinds them into poverty; one that makes it easier, not harder, for them to access support; and one where no child should ever grow up in poverty.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Claire Baker, who joins us remotely.

16:53

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** Scotland places compassion and justice at the heart of everything that we do. It is a place where everyone should have a decent standard of living and the same chances in life no matter who they are or where they come from. However, it is also a place where poverty, including child poverty, is increasing and where more and more families and individuals have to rely on food banks or struggle

to pay their bills. Scotland is a place where 1 million people live in poverty and the constant pressure of it can dominate their lives.

Before the pandemic, rates of relative and deep child poverty across Scotland were increasing. Demand on food banks and food parcel distributions is at an all-time high. Now, the withdrawal of emergency support, alongside the cost of living crisis, means that household budgets are under more strain than ever before but those who are in need are getting less support to deal with it. No one chooses to have their child go to bed hungry or to turn off the heating on a cold night. However, for far too many families, that is the reality: parents who cannot afford winter coats and shoes, and kids who are not getting birthday presents or Christmas gifts.

More than 240,000 children in Scotland are experiencing poverty right now, and more than half will have experienced poverty by the time they are 12 years old. Every one child living in poverty is one too many. Those children and their families do not want to hear an argument between Governments about who is most responsible. They do not want to be told how the pandemic has changed the backdrop—they have experienced it, and they continue to feel its impact at first hand. They do not care to compare figures with those for families in another country. They want to know whether they have food for their next meal and whether they can afford to heat their homes. They need money in their pockets today.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 mandates that less than 18 per cent of children should be in relative poverty by 2023-24, and less than 10 per cent by 2030-31, yet prior to the pandemic, child poverty rates were increasing in every region of Scotland. In Fife, child poverty has increased by 2.7 per cent since 2015, to 26.4 per cent in 2019-20. More than one in four children in Fife are living in poverty—that is 16,981, or almost 17,000, children. That is shameful.

In Fife, as in many areas, community organisations have been stepping up to deliver support where they can to fill the gaps and help those on their doorstep to get by. That support is invaluable, and community groups should have a role in local delivery, but we need better support so that fewer families have to rely on those safety nets.

The First Minister has previously said that she wanted the driving mission of the Parliament to be ending child poverty, but the action to date, although it indicates that we could see some progress, does not match the ambition of those words. The failure to end poverty is a failure to end wider inequalities. We know that children in poverty are more likely to be from ethnic minorities

or living with lone parents or in families in which someone has a disability.

We have heard much today about the responsibility that lies with Westminster. Yesterday's spring statement failed to provide for those who are struggling the most, and the choices that the Conservative Government is making are exacerbating the cost of living crisis. However, both Governments need to do more to prevent poverty and to enable families and individuals who are living in poverty to get out.

The SNP argues for more powers, but it needs to use every lever that it currently has available to fight poverty and support the children and families who are in need across the country. The SNP's own growth commission exposed the poverty that would come from the economics of independence, for which I have heard many SNP members try to argue today.

The Scottish Government needs to do more. It has powers over housing, local government, health, tax and social security, yet it is failing to take the policy decisions that are needed and failing to meet its own targets. The policies that it has put in place are widely expected to fall short, which will mean failing to meet an interim target that would itself mean that 18 per cent of children were still living in poverty. The Scottish Government now projects that around 17 per cent of children will be in relative poverty by that point, based on optimistic assumptions. However, even if that is the case, we should be saddened by that figure, not proud of it.

Poverty is a stubborn issue to address, but when we have seen so little progress over a period of years, we need to reflect on where and how money is being spent and whether we have the right balance between universal support and more targeted measures. We need an evidence-based and inclusive approach to ensure that support is getting to those who are most at risk. The establishment of a child poverty commission would focus action to look at all aspects of devolved policy and design a route map to not just reduce but end child poverty.

The Scottish child payment is a positive step. It will get money directly to families on low incomes, and it must be rolled out as soon as possible. However, it will not stretch far enough and must be further increased. A payment of £25 a week pales in comparison to the increases in food and heating bills that families are facing.

We must ensure that every family is able to access all the benefits to which they are entitled, and that the Scottish welfare fund is expanded to ensure that there is a stronger safety net for those who are facing financial emergencies. We also want better routes to secure and quality

employment for parents. People who are in low-paid, insecure work are too often battling rising household costs while juggling caring responsibilities.

The pandemic has shown us that, for many, it would not take much to change their lives. A loss of wages, a hike in rent or an unexpected bill could be all that it would take to make it harder for those people to get by. We cannot let so many Scots continue to live like that. We cannot continue to have Scotland be a place where half of our children will experience poverty. We all want to live in a society that supports our children to be the best that they can be, but we need to do much more to make that a reality.

16:59

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and the launch of the next phase of our tackling child poverty delivery plan. It is absolutely correct that eradicating child poverty should be a national mission of our Government. The way in which we want to see our children treated will define us as a country.

The measures contained in the plan are very welcome. Our approach rightly shows that, to end child poverty, we need a multi-agency approach, with all parts of society signing up to that national mission. There can be no more important issue for the Parliament to debate than the welfare of our nation's children. We must be resolute in our determination to act to remove all barriers and see our young people thrive.

There is much to be done and we should work collectively and take an honest and realistic approach when considering how to get to our stated destination. That honesty should call out all the obstacles and avoid kite-flying and political opportunism. If we are all signed up to the national endeavour, we need cross-party consensus on how to deliver on that mission. In that spirit, we must recognise what has been achieved already. We also need to recognise that the challenge is made even greater by the cost of living crisis.

Our Government and this Parliament must do everything within the powers that we have to eradicate child poverty, and we have seen some very welcome progress in that regard. When other political parties were calling for a Scottish child payment of £5, the Scottish Government instead introduced a payment of £10. Recognising the scale of the challenge, we accelerated our plans to increase the payment to £20 per week. It will now be £25, which is five times more than the amount that other parties suggested.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Marie McNair:** I will if it is brief and I will get the time back.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You will.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** What would the member do about and say to the 150,000 children on bridging payments who do not get the double amount of the Scottish child payment?

**Marie McNair:** I thank the member for her intervention, but I will not take any lessons from a representative of a party that backed the cap on welfare spending.

The Child Poverty Action Group said that the Scottish child payment

“is a real lifeline for families across Scotland who are facing a perfect storm of financial insecurity as the UK cut to universal credit bites, energy prices soar and the wider costs of living rise.”

I welcome the fact that almost £6 billion has been invested to support low-income households across Scotland over the past three years. I also welcome the announcement that, subject to parliamentary approval, eight of our Scottish social security benefits will be increased by 6 per cent from 1 April, which is very significant. That contrasts with a 3.1 per cent increase for Department for Work and Pensions benefits. In the context of child poverty, it is deeply concerning that we cannot apply the 6 per cent increase to disability benefits, when we know that disability is a major driver of poverty. When I questioned the Minister for Social Security and Local Government at last week’s meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I warmly welcomed his call for the Westminster Government to do the right thing and mirror our higher uprating.

Scotland remains the only part of the UK to have five family benefits, including the Scottish child payment, that were designed to tackle child poverty head on. The Scottish child payment, combined with the three best start grants and best start foods, means that low-income families can receive more than £10,000 of financial support by the time their first child turns six and more than £9,700 for each subsequent child. That is £8,200 more than the support that is available in England and Wales—and for every eligible child; there is no two-child policy here, with its abhorrent rape clause.

I have long campaigned against the benefit cap and I welcome the cabinet secretary’s plan for mitigation. In an honest better together world, we need to compare our approach with that of the Westminster Government. The Office for Budget Responsibility, which was set up by the Tories, has stated that the current standard of living crisis is the biggest fall in living standards since records began.

The statement made by the chancellor yesterday was a chance to provide necessary support; it was also a chance for him to join us in making the eradication of child poverty a national mission. Instead, he ignored the calls to reinstate the £20 uplift to universal credit even though its removal was estimated to be responsible for placing 20,000 children in poverty and described as the biggest cut to benefits since the welfare state was established.

The chancellor has refused to mirror our uprating level of 6 per cent for DWP benefits, even for child benefit, at a time when we are increasing the Scottish child payment; he has maintained the five-week waiting time for universal credit and the two-child policy with its abhorrent rape clause—which is absolutely disgusting; and there has been no uprating to the benefit cap, which denies families with children the basic level of subsistence that they should get in a safety-net social security system. The Resolution Foundation has pointed out that £2 in every £3 of new support goes to the top half.

Let us get real and not deny that UK policies are holding us back. The misery that those policies are inflicting is real and they are a significant barrier to eradicating child poverty. They cause misery and hardship and hold our communities back.

I pause to praise the outstanding work of advice agencies, food banks, council staff, health and social care partnership staff, housing associations and all the volunteers and caring communities in my constituency. They are there, day in and day out, supporting those in need. They are, quite simply, life savers.

Let us get behind the delivery plan and call for the powers—the full levers—that will allow us to eradicate child poverty, as it is clear that the Westminster Government does not have the same ambition to end that misery. Let that not get in the way of what we need to do to help our nation’s children thrive.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We now move to closing speeches. I call Martin Whitfield, who has around six minutes.

17:05

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Labour.

In her statement, the cabinet secretary was right to say that we are too often blunted in our potential to tackle inequality and poverty. She was right, too, to say that there is no silver bullet when it comes to tackling poverty and that, if there were, poverty would not be a problem. However, we need to take great care not to end up in slogan

cul-de-sacs when we are talking about individual children.

I extend my thanks to the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland, whose members came to me early on and talked about the challenge that they face when they do not get multiyear funding. It is a great pleasure to see in the plan the proposal for multiyear funding to give the third sector the support that it needs and to give families on-going support. The plan uses the phrase

“where possible to do so”.

It would be helpful if the Deputy First Minister could tell us whether multiyear funding will be available to the third sector as soon as possible, because I know that it needs it very much.

I would like to explore one aspect of the cabinet secretary’s statement in relation to “Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022”, which is the original plan that the new plan takes further. She talked about investment under that plan of £5.9 billion in support of low-income households, of which £2.18 billion was estimated to have directly benefited children. It would be useful to know how the remaining £3.72 billion helped to lift children out of poverty.

Given my brief with regard to young people, I will take a couple of minutes to consider education and learning.

Poverty affects our children hugely. The plan rightly points out that we need

“to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty with a focus on tackling the poverty related attainment gap.”

Children who are hungry cannot learn; children who are cold cannot learn; and children who come from households in which there are parental stresses because of money are not in a position to learn.

Last week, I spoke with a teacher who told me that a young girl had come to the high school with no soles on her shoes—she had walked in with just the covering. The school’s staff did what they have done especially well during the Covid pandemic: they stepped up. They burrowed around and found a pair of shoes. This is 2022. We are expecting children to sit exams in only a few weeks, yet they do not have shoes on their feet.

Where is the baseline assessment of the damage done in the past two years, as a result of Covid, to children and young people going through education? Such an assessment would allow us to consider how to make improvements; to prepare, should anything as abhorrent happen to us again; and to consider how to help that Covid generation

get on with their lives with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

I would like to see the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child come back to Parliament, so that young people can hold to account the politicians—from all parties—who say brave words, speak loudly and do nothing.

I will be careful in doing so, but I wish to address a point that arose during Pam Duncan-Glancy’s speech. She talked about the benefit cap and discussed the very welcome £10 million in the new plan for its mitigation. If we look at the universal credit dashboard, we see that, as of August 2021, 6,400 households were subject to the benefit cap in Scotland. At an average £208 per month, that would be just under £16 million, yet the offer is £10 million.

**Shona Robison:** The figures are based on the uprated DWP figures, which are the latest projections. It is £10 million plus £3 million that local authorities have already put in, which makes a total of £13 million. *[Shona Robison has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

**Martin Whitfield:** I am grateful for that intervention and to get that on to the record. We can look to that in the future.

I will pick up on another of Pam Duncan-Glancy’s comments, which goes back to my comment about slogans. I am concerned about the “small number” of pathfinder areas that are discussed in the report and about the

“work with up to 300 people in 2022-23”.

There are young people in our communities who are hungry now. Can we not raise our ambition from having a small number of pathfinders to having a pathfinding project that can help all young people who are in poverty? Rather than working with 300 people, can we not increase that number?

The increase in benefits is welcome. However, I note the Save the Children briefing, which I am sure many members in the chamber have received and which says:

“Tackling the structural drivers of poverty is critical. Save the Children supports a cash-first approach”.

That point has been echoed by a number of members in the debate. The briefing continues:

“The most impactful action that can be taken is to double the Scottish Child Payment to £40 as soon as possible.”

That would lift children out of poverty by putting cash where cash is needed.

In response to Miles Briggs’s speech, I note that, if we hit local government, we are hitting the vehicle that works most closely with these people.

I thank Elena Whitham for, and congratulate her on, sharing her life experience of being in poverty.

Members across the chamber all want the same outcome, and we can raise our ambition to achieve it. However, as the cabinet secretary said in her statement, there is no doubt that—here I make an amendment—this Government could and should have done so much more.

17:12

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I welcome the opportunity to make the closing speech for the Scottish Conservatives. I acknowledge the publication of the tackling child poverty delivery plan for 2022 to 2026, and I reiterate the comments of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the upcoming plans must set out a clear and measurable course for meeting poverty targets by April 2024.

Although I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement today, the SNP has now been in power for 15 years. During that time, we have witnessed increased levels of child poverty, despite the many devolved powers that this Scottish Government could use to reduce poverty.

**Shona Robison:** Will Meghan Gallacher take an intervention?

**Meghan Gallacher:** No, thank you. I would like to make progress. *[Interruption.]* I have just started my speech. I will take an intervention later on.

The recent "Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution" report, which was written by the Institute of Public Policy Research think tank, estimated that, by 2030, 13 per cent of children will still be living in relative poverty, which is 3 per cent off the SNP's target of 10 per cent. It is not good enough that the SNP Government could miss its own targets on child poverty; it must do more to tackle the root causes to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, is given the opportunity to succeed.

As highlighted by the cabinet secretary today, this is not the first child poverty delivery plan that the SNP Government has announced. The 2018-2022 delivery plan outlined actions such as boosting employment, expanding social security and tackling the cost of living. Although some actions have been achieved, other programmes such as the fair start Scotland scheme managed to achieve only a 25 per cent success rate.

Alongside education, employment is one of the best routes out of poverty. That view is backed by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which has urged the SNP to reduce barriers to employment in order to tackle child poverty directly by, for example, increasing funding for the parental employability support fund and introducing a job

guarantee for priority families. Those measures would reduce the number of children living in poverty who are in working households.

The SNP has the powers to do more to address in-work poverty. I hope that the tackling child poverty delivery plan will contain successful schemes that will support more people than its predecessor plan.

Many colleagues from all parties have made important points during the debate. Miles Briggs mentioned that more than 7,500 children are living in temporary accommodation. SNP-Green ministers are failing to provide the leadership that is necessary to address the housing crisis and get families and children into safe, secure and affordable homes as a matter of priority.

After 15 years of the SNP Government, we see no plan and no end to children living in temporary accommodation. As Miles Briggs rightly said, by not reaching out to other parties, except the Greens, the Government could have missed opportunities to work collegiately with all the parties.

Pam Duncan-Glancy critiqued the Scottish Government's plans, and she called for concrete plans and resolutions to tackle the cost of living and child poverty. Again, the Government could have reached out to all parties, and I am left wondering what could have been announced today as part of the delivery plan if that had been the case.

Beatrice Wishart spoke about providing opportunities for our young people and families, and measures that could have been taken to improve their wellbeing. I agree with her criticisms of the Scottish Government's decision to cut local government funding by £250 million. I will speak more about that later.

A number of SNP members mentioned that, if Scotland separated from the rest of the UK, it would give the Government more powers to tackle child poverty. My colleague Dean Lockhart reminded members that it was the SNP Government that rejected and delayed additional welfare powers that would have given the Scottish Parliament the opportunity to look at alternatives for Scotland, should it have wanted to.

**Jim Fairlie:** Will the member give way?

**Meghan Gallacher:** No. I would like to make progress, thank you.

I do not want to turn the debate into a constitutional squabble, but—*[Interruption.]* There is a but. But how can the SNP Government be serious about independence when it does not use the powers that are available to it? *[Interruption.]* Today's debate should have focused on—SNP members have not focused on this entirely—

reducing child poverty in Scotland, not on the SNP's political obsessions.

During his contribution, my colleague Alexander Stewart raised an important issue about childcare provision, which is one of the many ways in which the Government could help children and families to get out of poverty. Delivering 1,140 hours of free childcare provision received cross-party support and, as a councillor, I welcomed that in my local authority area of North Lanarkshire, which has high levels of deprivation. The provision of free childcare gives our young people the best start in life and supports parents so that they can work and provide for their families without that additional childcare cost. It also supports the getting it right for every child model, a principle that is also widely supported.

However, as I have said in the chamber previously, there are deep-rooted issues with the delivery of 1,140 hours. I once again call on the Scottish Government to listen to the private and voluntary industry, which has warned that the current funding model will force nurseries to close or reduce their hours. If the Government does not act now, a crisis could emerge in our nursery sector that could leave its flagship policy in ruins.

I am conscious of time, but I want to stay on the subject of education. The SNP Government must do more to close the attainment gap and provide our young people with the tools to succeed. As other members have mentioned, Audit Scotland's "Improving outcomes for young people through school education" report outlines that the attainment gap remains wide and that improvements are needed to close it more quickly. If the SNP continues with its abysmal record on education, closing the attainment gap will be unachievable, and the Government's failure will leave many young people in poverty.

For my final point, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as I am a serving councillor in North Lanarkshire, because I want to talk about the cuts to local government funding and the pressures that local authorities face to deliver for communities, especially those that are in the greatest need of support. Tackling child poverty is a key part of the work of our councils, and it is made difficult when the Scottish Government chooses to cut the budget year on year.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Meghan Gallacher:** I am in my final minute. Presiding Officer, I am happy to give way if I can have the time back.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You will get the time back.

**John Mason:** I thank the member for giving way so enthusiastically. Is the member therefore arguing that we should have given more to local government in recent years and less to the NHS?

**Meghan Gallacher:** I did not realise that it was one or the other. The Scottish Government should be fiscally responsible, but it certainly has not been. We have seen that during the discussions about the ferry fiasco in recent days.—  
[*Interruption.*]

The reason that I wish to raise the cuts to local government, and the pressures that they face to deliver for our local communities—  
[*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Could back benchers who have not been in the chamber for much of the debate stop having a conversation at the back of the room while those on the front benches are speaking?

**Meghan Gallacher:** Councils know their communities. If they were funded properly by the SNP Government, they would be able to implement plans to support areas of high deprivation. Therefore, the Scottish Government must work alongside local government to continue to identify areas that have high rates of household worklessness and to target an action plan at reversing those trends. Councils will not be able to do that unless they receive a fair level of funding. If the Government is serious about eradicating poverty, it must fund local councils properly so that they can provide much-needed support to those who need it most.

Today, we have heard many views about how we can tackle child poverty. One goal that we all have in common is that we want to tackle the root causes of child poverty, so I hope that the Scottish Government listens to the concerns that have been outlined by Opposition members today and that it will implement measures that will support children and families across the whole of Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call John Swinney to wind up the debate. Take us up to around 5.30, please, Deputy First Minister.

17:21

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

One point that Miles Briggs got correct—there was not much that he got correct—was that the national mission on child poverty is a cross-Government priority in the Scottish Government. My presence in closing the debate is designed to reinforce that point and to support and endorse the excellent leadership that has been shown in formulation of the delivery plan by the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local

Government, Shona Robison. She has worked extraordinarily hard, with her officials, to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, with parliamentary committees and with our partners in the Green Party to formulate the policy programme that is before Parliament.

For it to be a cross-Government strategy, it must be balanced across a range of relevant factors that will make a sustainable difference to eradicating child poverty once and for all, which Meghan Gallacher talked about. The measures that we take must be sustainable across the whole policy spectrum.

The strategy covers a range of measures, including enhancement of social security measures—on which the Government has already taken action, as Marie McNair pointed out. We responded to the calls for a child payment. Originally, that payment was to be £5. After saying that it would be £10, we doubled it to £20, and it has now gone up to £25, which is five times the original amount that was asked of the Government.

We have used our social security powers to effect other such changes. Just this week, the Minister for Social Security and Local Government announced a 6 per cent increase in the benefits that are under our control. Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government has announced—as a consequence of the dialogue that we have had with the Green Party on the plan—the steps that will be taken to mitigate the effects of the benefit cap, which will have a huge impact on child poverty in individual families. That is the first element of the three-pronged strategy.

The second element is tackling the costs that families are having to endure. We have set out a range of measures, including our steps on council tax, the work that has been done on the renters strategy—which Maggie Chapman mentioned—and the work that Ruth Maguire talked about in relation to income maximisation in order that families can tackle the cost of living and to ensure sustainability of our interventions.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** What can the Deputy First Minister say to the 177,000 children who are eligible for the Scottish child payment, but who do not currently receive it?

**John Swinney:** The Government is acting as swiftly as it can to put in place the Scottish child payment measures that will have an effect on children in Scotland. We are moving at pace to achieve that, and the steps that we have announced today demonstrate the substance of the Government's endeavours.

The third element of the strategy is about employability support. With the increased

resources that we have set out, there is a focus on additional support for early learning and childcare and for transportation costs.

Other flexible funds have been made available to our partners in local government—I will come on to its funding in a moment—to assist 12,000 people into employment. Long-term employability is crucial to tackling child poverty. Getting individuals into long-term sustained employment can be of benefit.

**Alexander Stewart:** Many children live with adults who have disabilities. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that the disability employment gap is tackled? That is a major issue for many households.

**John Swinney:** We do that through the employability support that we have in place and through measures that are already being implemented by the Minister for Social Security and Local Government to strengthen the position of people who have disabilities.

The strategy covers these three areas: social security, tackling the cost of living and employability support. The most charitable that I can be about the Opposition's reaction to the plan is to call it somewhat grudging.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**John Swinney:** I will not, at the moment.

There was a contrast between comments that were made by the Opposition and the speech by Elena Whitham. Her contribution was the most powerful lived testimony and was in stark contrast to the political posturing that we heard from the Opposition.

My colleague Ruth Maguire made a comment about the context in which we are operating. That context is crucial in determining the extent to which we can be successful in tackling child poverty. What she said was in contrast with the announcements that were made in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement yesterday, as was the case with a number of other members. Graham Simpson—a Conservative—went on television last night and gave an interview in which he said of the chancellor:

"I think he should have looked at doing something on benefits because we should be looking at the least well off in society. They're going to be the worst hit."

Not one single Conservative member has reiterated those comments in the debate. Instead, they cast a veil over the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer walked on the other side of the road yesterday and did not do a thing to help people on low incomes.



Alexander Stewart made a comment about the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom being deployed to support people. *The Daily Telegraph*, one of the two house journals of the Conservative Party, said in its headline this morning that the chancellor's announcement represents "The biggest fall in living standards on record". The other house journal of the Conservative Party, *The Daily Express*, had the headline, "The Forgotten Millions Say: What About Us?" That is a question that the Conservatives should be confronting, as their spokesman did on television last night, not one that they should be avoiding.

We can look at the path of child poverty. It was falling until 2010, but then something happened. There was a change of Government in the United Kingdom and the Conservatives and Liberals conspired to inflict austerity on the public. What happened? Relative poverty in this country increased. We have been battling that tide. No member should be mistaken about this Government's determination to do everything that we can, within our powers, to address that situation.

**Dean Lockhart:** Mr Swinney mentioned austerity. Does he agree with the conclusion of the SNP's very own Sustainable Growth Commission that spending on benefits would have to be reduced by 4 per cent of gross domestic product in an independent Scotland? That is its conclusion, not mine

**John Swinney:** The Scottish Government is determined to use the powers that we have at our disposal—as we have just done in uprating benefits—to tackle the crisis in living standards that people face, but the Conservatives have not lifted a finger to help people one iota, in that effort.

I said that I would come back to the subject of local government. That is because the Conservatives, after all their years of austerity, have dressed themselves up as the protectors of local government. Let me put a couple of facts on the record. In the budget for the forthcoming financial year, there is a 9.2 per cent cash increase in the local government budget, which is a 6.3 per cent real-terms increase. We are funding local government—our partners—to deliver the actions on child poverty that we are determined to take, through the plan.

My last comment is this: some members really need to keep up with the events of the afternoon. We have had a host of quotations read out in the debate on the points of view of commentators and stakeholders. Well, in the course of this afternoon, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Save the Children, the Poverty and Inequality Commission, the Independent Food Aid Network, the Trussell Trust, the Poverty Alliance, Barnardo's Scotland, and the

Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland have all welcomed the steps that the cabinet secretary announced this afternoon and have said that they are in stark contrast with the walking on the other side of the road by the UK Government yesterday.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate on the tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-26.

## Building Safety Bill

17:31

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-03702, in the name of Shona Robison, on a legislative consent motion on the Building Safety Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Building Safety Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 July 2021, relating to the New Homes Ombudsman Scheme, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Shona Robison*]

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

## Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:31

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-02793, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a financial resolution for the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill. I call George Adam to move the motion.

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam):** I am here, Presiding Officer.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You are not lurking in your usual position, minister.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*George Adam*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The question on that motion will also be put at decision time.

## Decision Time

17:31

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is that motion S6M-03702, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Building Safety Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Building Safety Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 July 2021, relating to the New Homes Ombudsman Scheme, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The final question is that motion S6M-02793, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a financial resolution for the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

*Meeting closed at 17:32.*

## Correction

Shona Robison has identified an error in her contribution and has provided the following correction.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison):**

*At Col 114, paragraph 3—*

*Original text—*

The figures are based on the uprated DWP figures, which are the latest projections. It is £10 million plus £3 million that local authorities have already put in, which makes a total of £13 million.

*Corrected text—*

The figures are based on the uprated DWP figures, which are the latest projections. It is £7 million plus £3 million that local authorities already put in, which makes a total of £10 million.



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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