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Thursday 3 November 2022

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 November 2022

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

General Question Time

Qualifications and Assessment

1. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the consultation on the future of qualifications and assessment. (S6O-01500)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Professor Hayward is leading an independent review on the future of qualifications and assessment. To inform that review, a public consultation was launched on 21 October and it will close on 16 December. The public consultation invites views on a range of topics, including the balance between exams and other forms of assessment, and how a wider range of learners' achievements can be recognised.

I encourage everyone with an interest to have their say. Professor Hayward is due to submit a final report for ministers to consider in March 2023. As previously made clear to Parliament, externally assessed examinations will remain part of any new system.

Pam Gosal: Last week saw the launch of the consultation into the future of exams and qualifications in Scotland. Only three of 59 members of the education reform board are teachers, and there are no parent representatives.

What assurance can the cabinet secretary give that the views of parents, pupils and teachers will not be ignored if they happen to disagree with the reforms that are proposed by others?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Oh dear. I fear that Pam Gosal has come to the chamber with a great lack of understanding of the education reform work that is going on. The board whose membership she refers to concerns the reform of the three national agencies. Professor Hayward's work, which is independent of Government, is being supported by an independent review group that includes learners, parents, carers, education staff and college and university representatives. I hope that, now that I have clarified that, Ms Gosal will be satisfied that parents, carers, education staff and college and university representatives are already included.

Accommodation (Displaced People from Ukraine)

2. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what support is available to displaced people from Ukraine who are moving from temporary accommodation into permanent housing. (S6O-01501)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Our aim is to improve the performance of the supersponsor scheme, and this week we published 16 interventions following a review of the scheme. We want to empower those arriving with clear advice, support and improved access to longer-term housing options, thereby reducing dependency on short-term and temporary accommodation. That is why we have put in place up to £50 million for our Ukraine longer-term capital fund to increase the overall supply of housing stock. That has already provided more than £400,000 to North Ayrshire Council and £6 million to Aberdeen City Council.

Mark Ruskell: I have seen at first hand how communities and local authorities across my region, from Killin to Rosyth, are working tirelessly to try to find long-term housing solutions for displaced Ukrainians who have found sanctuary in Scotland. However, it is critically important that any housing offer empowers our new Ukrainian neighbours to have choices over their next steps.

I welcomed Tuesday's statement by the Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine, but will the cabinet secretary outline what further support will be made available specifically to local authorities such as Stirling Council to support the displaced Ukrainians to access that housing and also, critically, to co-ordinate efforts with local communities who have their own interests with regard to finding solutions for their Ukrainian neighbours and are engaged in their own efforts to do so?

Shona Robison: We have provided £11.2 million of funding to increase the capacity of local authority resettlement teams, to support the refurbishment of properties and to enhance the pace of host checks and matching. I encourage local authorities to ensure that they are making full use of that funding. We are encouraging all local authorities and registered social landlords to consider what properties in their area could be brought back into use, and I encourage Mark Ruskell to discuss that fund with local authorities in his region, in order to identify opportunities to make best use of the funding.

Mark Ruskell also made a very important point about the role of communities. The warm, welcoming response from communities throughout

Scotland has been absolutely amazing. We want to encourage the continuation of that and we want solutions that are proposed by communities to be listened to and acted on where that is appropriate.

General Practitioners (Workload)

3. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to help general practitioners manage their workloads. (S6O-01502)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Despite the challenges of the pandemic, general practice is being strengthened significantly. We are committed to increasing the number of GPs in Scotland by 800 by the end of 2027, and we are making good progress towards that target. We have also now recruited 3,220 whole-time-equivalent healthcare professionals, such as community nurses and physiotherapists, into multidisciplinary teams across practices. Local evaluation shows that the expanded MDTs are freeing up GP capacity and allowing a focus on patients with more complex conditions. That is also reducing multiple appointments for the same issue, and it is associated with high staff and patient satisfaction.

Alexander Stewart: Almost every MSP in the chamber will have constituents who are unable to get an appointment with a GP. Instead of helping to address that issue, the cabinet secretary has cut GP sustainability payments by around £5 million. Considering the tremendous workload that GPs are under, how can the Scottish Government justify that?

Humza Yousaf: I remind Alexander Stewart that investment in general practice is going up, not down. We are investing at least £170 million a year in growing primary care multidisciplinary teams. That is up by £15 million from last year. We are supporting general practice, and we know and have heard anecdotally that face-to-face appointments are beginning to increase—although I accept that that is not to the level that some people would like. I have therefore asked GP practices that are not offering pre-bookable appointments to ensure that they are offering them.

I remind Alexander Stewart that the reason why we are having to reprofile money within health is, in large part, to respond to his party's economic incompetence. The health budget is worth £650 million less just due to inflation. Pay rises are way in excess of what we budgeted for because of the Tory cost crisis. I say to Alexander Stewart: please do not come here and shed crocodile tears about primary care when it was your party's disastrous stewardship of the United Kingdom economy that caused such devastating impacts in the first place.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Constituents have advised me that, post-Covid, in certain—only certain—GP practices, they are experiencing barriers to booking face-to-face appointments because the practices have changed their process so that there are online consultation forms, which are difficult for some constituents to use. Is the cabinet secretary aware of that, and will he comment on it?

Humza Yousaf: I am aware of that, and I absolutely accept what Christine Grahame said. As I said in my last response, I have spoken to the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners about that matter. That is why I came to the Parliament a number of weeks ago to say that I will personally be in contact with every single GP practice to ensure that pre-bookable appointments are also available to help with the face-to-face issue.

On online appointments and booking, I will ensure that I reach back in to our key stakeholders, such as the BMA and the RCGP, to ensure that those who are digitally excluded are not left out of getting face-to-face appointments, including GP appointments.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Last week, I met a respected GP in the south of Scotland who trains the next generation of doctors. The GP was blunt with me: he said that he and his colleagues are burnt out from not only the impact of the pandemic but the strain that GPs have been under for years. Many GPs are now at breaking point and are seriously considering early retirement. The Scottish Government needs to show GPs that it is serious about getting primary care services right. Given the announcement yesterday, does the cabinet secretary not fear that that will act as a catalyst for early retirement by GPs?

Humza Yousaf: Martin Whitfield has raised a very important point. When I met Dr Andrew Buist from the BMA earlier this week, he said a similar thing about GPs' burnout and workload. That is why it is so important that we continue to invest in the multidisciplinary team model. Funding for that continues. Recruiting 3,220 healthcare staff as part of the multidisciplinary team model will help to ease and alleviate some of the workload from general practice.

I say to Martin Whitfield that the reason why we are having to reprofile some of that money—which is, of course, staying within health—is to help us to ensure that we can put forward the best pay deal possible for our healthcare staff in these challenging times.

Women's Health Group

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of the women's health group, including when it will next meet. (S6O-01503)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The women's health group was established in February 2020 to develop a women's health plan. It was disbanded following the publication of our plan on 20 August 2021.

The women's health plan implementation programme board was established in January of this year to oversee the delivery of the plan. Chaired by Professor Marion Bain, the deputy chief medical officer, the board brings together a range of organisations to ensure that the actions in the plan are implemented effectively, with continued input and influence from women themselves.

The board meets quarterly and it last met yesterday. The terms of reference and other information about the board are available on the Scottish Government's website.

Kenneth Gibson: Six months ago, I was advised that the Government is working with the Scottish perinatal network to examine adoption of the placental growth factor test for pregnant women in order to detect pre-eclampsia, which can kill both mother and baby or lead to further health risks later in life.

Such tragedies can now be prevented by the use of those simple and reliable tests, which are already in use in places from England to Sierra Leone. Can the cabinet secretary therefore advise us on progress in rolling out PLGF tests in Scotland?

Humza Yousaf: First, I recognise the interest that Kenneth Gibson has had in this issue for not just many months but many years. Progress has been made—the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that women receive high-quality, safe care, including in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of pre-eclampsia.

Although national health service boards in Scotland can already choose to offer placental growth factor testing should they wish to do so, we continue to progress that work with the Scottish perinatal network. We have also approached the Scottish health technologies group, which provides advice to NHS Scotland on the use of new and existing technologies. That group started work last month on considering the most recent National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on PLGF testing and will produce an adapted version of the guidance for Scotland, with recommendations.

The SHTG has started consulting the clinical community, patients' organisations and wider stakeholders, and that work is expected to be completed by spring 2023. However, on the back of the member's question, I will explore whether any further pace can be injected into the process, given how important we know the tests can be.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Waiting Times)

5. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is reducing waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services. (S6O-01504)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): We are setting the conditions needed for long-term, sustainable improvement to the CAMHS systems.

In the last quarter, we saw an 8.6 per cent drop in the number of waits over 18 weeks. However, I recognise that performance against the national waiting time standard varies across health boards. We are directing tailored support to boards that are not on track to meet the standard, providing access to professional advice and ensuring that they have robust improvement plans in place. We are monitoring progress closely.

I have also met recently with the boards that are furthest away from achieving the standard to discuss my concerns and my expectations for improvement.

Neil Bibby: I have previously written to the minister about my constituent John, who lives in East Dunbartonshire. John's nine-year-old son has been self-harming. He waited six months from referral until initial assessment by CAMHS. He was then told that it would be a further year until a support plan was in place. John's younger son is now imitating his brother's behaviour. The entire family are at their wits' end.

Thousands of children are on waiting lists despite the Scottish Government repeatedly promising to fix the situation. Can the minister explain to John why children are continuing to wait so long to get the proper support plans that they need?

Kevin Stewart: Neither John nor his son should be put in that position and I will write again to Mr Bibby about that situation. We want young people to be treated as quickly as possible; we also want to put in place a system in which there is not overreliance on acute services and we are able to deal with things before they reach that stage.

We are working very hard and have invested very heavily in CAMH services. Obviously, there has been an impact because of the Covid

pandemic, but we are seeing progress. I hope that that progress continues, and I will write to Mr Bibby.

Rent Freeze (Affordable Housing)

6. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that affordable housing development plans have been put on hold because of its rent freeze. (S6O-01505)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Scotland is significantly ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom in providing affordable housing, having delivered almost 113,000 affordable homes since 2007, more than 79,000 of which were for social rent. We recognise the impact of high interest rates and high material and labour costs, which is why we continue to operate a flexible grant system, which we expect will support the continued delivery of the affordable homes target.

In advance of the passage of the emergency legislation, we set up a working group with social landlords to help assess the options for keeping rents affordable for tenants beyond 31 March 2023 in the light of the cost of living crisis. That work is continuing, and during the passage of the bill, we further committed to giving clarity and certainty to social landlords on rent setting no later than 14 January 2023.

Jeremy Balfour: The cabinet secretary has failed to answer the question. Lord Willie Haughey recently announced that his plans to spend more than £1 billion on building 11,000 affordable homes in Scotland had been scrapped. Lord Haughey specifically said that, because of Patrick Harvie's rent freeze bill, he would have to "put things on hold". Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the Scottish National Party Government's rent freeze has made the housing crisis in Scotland worse, not better?

Shona Robison: I certainly recognise, once again, the laissez-faire attitude of the Tories in opposing measures to help tenants with rent increases during a cost of living crisis—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members! Thank you.

Shona Robison: —in the same way as they opposed measures to restrict the loss of housing to short-term holiday lets. They have no ideas and no solutions—it is just opposition for opposition's sake. However, they refuse to take responsibility for the disastrous economic policies of the Tory Government, leading to high interest rates—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Those high interest rates have had the biggest impact on the social rented sector and the affordable housing supply programme. As ever, there is total hypocrisy from the Tories.

Agriculture Bill (Consultation)

7. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its consultation on a new agriculture bill. (S6O-01506)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government launched our consultation entitled "Delivering our Vision for Scottish Agriculture: Proposals for a new Agriculture Bill" on 29 August. The consultation closes on 21 November, and all members of the public are encouraged to submit responses. Alongside the consultation, we are hosting a number of events to hear views from across the country on what needs to feature in the bill to transform how we support farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

Rachael Hamilton: Yesterday, hundreds of farmers with a handful of tractors rallied outside the Parliament to highlight the issues that are facing farmers across Scotland. They feel let down by a Scottish National Party-Green coalition that simply does not understand their concerns. Their disdain for the Bute house agreement was especially clear. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Can we please hear Ms Hamilton?

Rachael Hamilton: Given the views that were expressed by farmers yesterday, does the minister agree that her Green coalition partners have no understanding of the needs of rural Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: I am not even sure where to begin with that question, except to say—*[Interruption.]*—that farmers and food producers in Scotland are quite right to come to the Parliament to speak to their representatives. The fact of the matter is that, while I stand here answering the question, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands is right now with the agriculture reform implementation oversight board, where she is proactively engaging with the industry to design future policy. Whether on Brexit, on utter economic incompetence or on the Tories' complete refusal to listen to the industry—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members! Thank you.

Màiri McAllan: —it is the member's party in government that is repeatedly and profoundly letting down Scotland's food producers.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It never ceases to amaze me when the Tories try to promote themselves as the party that stands up for farmers. They can say what they like about their concerns and support for agriculture, but where was that support and that concern when they opposed this Parliament's withholding consent to the Subsidy Control Act 2022? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will hear Mr Fairlie.

Jim Fairlie: The hypocrisy is utterly galling. NFU Scotland was clear in its concerns about the potential impact on farmers of that legislation, which could have a profound and fundamental impact on our ability to tailor support to the specific needs of Scotland's farmers, whom the Tories are supposed to represent. Does the minister agree that, while the other parties can be relied upon to play politics, when it comes down to the facts the SNP can be relied on to safeguard and deliver on the interests of Scottish agriculture?

Màiri McAllan: I completely agree with Jim Fairlie, who is a very useful voice for the farming industry in the Parliament. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, can we make sure that we can hear all members when they are speaking?

Màiri McAllan: The inclusion of agricultural support in the scope of the United Kingdom Subsidy Control Act 2022 is unnecessary and risks undermining the agricultural support framework. Farmers and crofters in Scotland face challenges that are not found elsewhere in the UK, but the legislation constrains our and the Parliament's ability to develop future policies that are tailored to meet those challenges. However, we remain fully committed to delivering our vision for agriculture and implementing a framework that delivers both high-quality food production and empowers Scotland's farmers and food producers to play their very important role in mitigating climate change and supporting nature recovery in Scotland. We will get on with that job.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

National Health Service (Scans)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I have previously raised examples of patients being sent south of the border for national health service treatment because they cannot get it here from Scotland's NHS. Now, through a freedom of information request, we have learned that £500,000 of Scottish taxpayers' money has been spent on sending almost 15,000 patient scans around the world—some as far away as Australia—to be reviewed. Why are Scottish scans being sent to private companies on another continent for analysis?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The NHS will always take steps to ensure the speediest possible diagnosis and treatment of patients. As for what Douglas Ross has narrated, I am happy to look closely at the figures and respond to him in more detail, but that number will represent a tiny fraction of the processing of scans overall in Scotland. Where, for whatever reason, whether it be partly to do with the nature of the condition or, at times, constraints in the service here—I do not know whether it is to do with that in this case—steps have to be taken to speed up test results and the treatment of patients, the NHS will take them.

The fact of the matter is that we are investing record sums and employing record numbers of people in our national health service, but the service is under significant pressure. We will continue to support it to ensure that patients get the services and the treatment that they deserve.

Douglas Ross: Let me tell the First Minister why thousands of scans are being sent abroad at great cost to Scotland's NHS. The Royal College of Radiologists has said that Scotland needs 100 more consultant radiologists than it has right now.

However, the problems are not unique to radiology. Across Scotland's NHS, serious issues are mounting. Health figures this week show that delayed discharge in our NHS has reached its worst ever levels, meaning that patients are unable to get home and are stuck in our hospitals at a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds. Nearly eight years ago, the then Scottish National Party health secretary—who is still sitting on the front bench—promised to “eradicate delayed discharge” within the space of a year. Today, it is worse than ever before. Will the First Minister's Government ever “eradicate delayed discharge” as it promised?

The First Minister: I remember on many occasions over the past years—when I was health

secretary and since I have been First Minister—Conservatives coming to the chamber and criticising this Government for not using the independent sector more to tackle waiting times. It seems that, today, Douglas Ross is doing the exact opposite. I am not sure whether that is another flip-flop from Douglas Ross—that is for him to determine.

With regard to the pressures on our national health service, there has been a global pandemic since the start of 2020, which everybody knows is having an impact on services. However, let us look in more detail at the two particular issues that Douglas Ross raised.

First, with regard to radiology, under this Government, there has been an increase of 62.5 per cent in the number of clinical radiology consultants, as well as an increase in the overall NHS workforce. We have increased the number of radiography staff by 20.5 per cent. We also need to recruit internationally, but there is a global shortage of radiologists, and the challenge of international recruitment is not made easier by the policies of the Conservatives on Brexit and immigration. Nevertheless, we will continue to invest in recruitment and the overall NHS workforce.

Secondly, with regard to delayed discharges, we continue to see significant pressure across the entire health and care system. More people who are coming through hospitals need high levels of care and support in order to be discharged home, and we are investing to address that significant challenge. We are investing more than £100 million to enhance care at home, we have increased the hourly rate of pay for social care workers, and we are investing £40 million to enhance multidisciplinary teams.

However, despite those pressures, the number of average bed days occupied by delay is now similar to pre-Covid levels. The total number of delayed discharges in the most recent year is actually down by 23 per cent on the period immediately pre-Covid.

Those are significant challenges, but the policies, interventions and investment of this Government are intended to address those challenges, and we will continue to take those steps.

Douglas Ross: The question was about whether the First Minister will promise, as her former health secretary did, to “eradicate delayed discharge”, but she refused to answer. Delayed discharge has got worse, but the First Minister’s excuses are the same.

Serious problems like that are happening throughout our NHS. Today, there are reports of a pensioner in Musselburgh who has been trying to

get through to her general practitioner to get treatment for a lung infection. She had to phone the practice 120 times before she got through to anyone. The lady said, “This is the first time in my life I feel like I don’t have proper medical care.” Does the First Minister think that it is acceptable that anyone—let alone an elderly, vulnerable person—has to call a GP more than 100 times before they get through?

The First Minister: I will answer the question about delayed discharges before I come to the issues around GP services.

Of course, it is our intention and policy to eradicate delayed discharges—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I would be grateful if we could have silence when members are speaking on their feet.

The First Minister: The key piece of information that I gave to Douglas Ross in my previous answer is that we have had a pandemic and, whether he likes to admit it or not, that has had an impact on health and social care services not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, Europe and the world.

If we look at the situation in relation to the most recent year for which we have a full year’s figures, we see that there has been a reduction in delayed discharge compared with the period that immediately preceded the Covid pandemic. That is a result of not only the dedication of those who work in health and social care, but the interventions that I referenced in my first answer. We will continue to invest in and support policies that are intended to eradicate delayed discharges.

With regard to GP services, I do not think that the experience that was narrated is acceptable, and I am interested in hearing from the particular GP practice about the reasons for that. GPs are working under considerable stress, strain and pressure, as is the entire NHS, which is why we are committed to further increases in funding for GP services and to recruiting more GPs. We will continue to do the hard work of Government to support our national health service.

My final point is that, if it was down to Douglas Ross, those very difficult circumstances in our national health service would be even worse, because tens of millions of pounds—even more money—would have to be taken out of services to give tax cuts to the wealthiest. It is only six weeks since Douglas Ross demanded that we take money out of public services and give tax cuts to the wealthy. No matter the challenges that the NHS is facing, everybody across Scotland will be breathing a sigh of relief because at least the Conservatives are not in government here, in Scotland.

Douglas Ross: Whether or not the First Minister wants to admit it, Scotland's NHS is in crisis at every level. Patient scans are being sent abroad and waiting lists—which were too long before Covid—are now at record levels. The situation at accident and emergency departments is at the most critical level that it has ever been at, and delayed discharge is plaguing our patients and hospitals worse than ever before.

On top of all of that, reports this week say that we could be facing a winter of strikes by staff across our NHS, which could cripple the health service in Scotland. This week, Dr Iain Kennedy, the chairman of the British Medical Association Scotland, said:

“Doctors are terrified about the winter and the year ahead.”

They are right to be terrified, are they not, First Minister?

The First Minister: People are right to be worried about the ability of our national health service to cope with spending constraints and the impact of Tory mismanagement on our economy.

Since we have been in the chamber, we have heard that interest rates have been increased by the Bank of England to 3 per cent, which is the highest rate for 14 years and the biggest single increase since black Wednesday, in 1992. That is the cost to people of Tory economic mismanagement.

On the national health service, in Scotland, we have higher funding per head of population for the NHS than there is in the rest of the UK, and our accident and emergency services, although under significant pressure, are the best performing anywhere in the UK.

In terms of the agenda for change workforce and pay, I wish that we could give them more, because they deserve every penny that we can give them. However, in Scotland, they are being offered an average pay increase of 7 per cent, with more than 11 per cent for the lowest paid. That compares with 4.5 per cent in England, where the Conservatives are in power, and in Wales, where Labour is in power. We are having to fund that increase without any additional resources from the Westminster Government. Instead, on 17 November, we face the prospect of spending cuts—again, to pay for Tory economic mismanagement.

I will continue to take seriously my job of supporting the NHS, and I will take no lessons from the Conservatives, who are making such a mess of the economy, with disastrous impacts for all of our public services.

National Health Service (Waiting Times)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** This Government has no grip on the national health service crisis. Staff are being asked to do the impossible and patients are being asked to accept the unacceptable.

I will give just one example: 81-year-old Catrina McFarlane has bone cancer, a disease that can cause significant pain and increases the risk of fractures. Last month, she had a fall at home, and she and her husband heard a snapping sound. She was in extreme pain. Due to her condition, she was told that she would need to be transported to hospital in an ambulance. That was at 10.15 in the morning. At 11 o'clock that night—13 hours later—Catrina was still waiting in pain. The emergency operator, who was in tears, said that they could not even guarantee an ambulance by the next morning.

The following day, Catrina's husband gave up waiting for an ambulance and, in desperation, took her to hospital himself. She was diagnosed with a fractured pelvis. Why did Catrina McFarlane have to wait in pain for nearly 24 hours for an ambulance that never turned up?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am happy to look into Catrina's experience. Nobody should wait that length of time for an ambulance, and I will not say otherwise.

As we do with accident and emergency and the NHS overall, this Government continues to focus on supporting our NHS through these difficult times so that it can recover from the impact of the pandemic and get back to delivering the level of service that all patients have a right to expect.

Looking specifically at the Ambulance Service, it, like A and E, is dealing with significant pressures, but its staffing under this Government is up by 67.3 per cent. The number of paramedics is up by almost 40 per cent and ambulance technicians are up by more than 60 per cent. This year, we have allocated additional funding of £45 million over the Ambulance Service's baseline funding to support workforce growth and service improvement. Our ambulances are saving more critically unwell patients than ever before, and they are diverting cases away from accident and emergency.

Although, of course, an experience like that is not acceptable, and other patients will be having experiences like that right now, the fact is that the vast majority of people who rely on our Ambulance Service, or on any part of the NHS, get an extraordinarily good service from those who work in our national health service. The duty of me and my Government is to ensure, through investment and other interventions, that we are supporting those workers every step of the way. It is not easy.

It is not easy for any Government right now, particularly in light of the economic circumstances, but each and every single day we will not shy away from that duty.

Anas Sarwar: Week after week, year after year, the First Minister comes and tells people that it is unacceptable, and then expects people to accept the unacceptable, with devastating consequences across the country. Change the script, First Minister.

Catrina's experience is not an isolated one. One reason that ambulances are not available is that they are queuing outside A and E, waiting to drop off patients—in some cases for hours. Last week, I highlighted the hidden waits at assessment units; this week, it is patients waiting hours in ambulances just to get through the doors of the hospital. In the past month, more than 2,700 ambulances across Scotland waited at least an hour and 50 minutes to drop off their patients. In just one month at one hospital—the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow—218 ambulances waited more than three hours. These are ambulances and paramedics that should be out on the road supporting patients, but are instead forced to wait hours outside A and E.

Last year, I asked the Government to support calls from paramedics and ambulance drivers for a 15-minute turnaround time at A and E, with a maximum wait of 30 minutes. Why is the Government not listening to the paramedics and ambulance drivers? Why are things getting worse, even before we reach the peak winter challenges?

The First Minister: First, I will not stop what this Government is doing to support our national health service. Government, at the best of times—and these are not the best of times—is hard. It is more complicated than simple soundbites or setting targets; we have to do the work in order to achieve them.

That means supporting our national health service and those who work in it with the investment and the wider support that they need. We will continue to take all of those steps. I have narrated the increase in the number of people who are working in our Ambulance Service and the additional investment that we are putting into the Ambulance Service to ensure that we can see that improvement.

Anas Sarwar is right that these issues are all interconnected, so we need to invest in the wider health service in order to improve performance of the Ambulance Service. No, I will not stop saying that we are doing these things, because they are the necessary steps that any Government would need to take to support our NHS in these tough times.

Of course, management of the NHS is our responsibility and nobody else's. However, our NHS is not immune from wider economic and budgetary decisions that, unfortunately, are outwith the hands of this Government. I wish that we could invest much, much more in our national health service. I agree very much with the Welsh First Minister, Mark Drakeford, who recognises that, although it is his responsibility to manage the health service in Wales, that has been impacted by the decisions of the Tories at Westminster. He can recognise that, so I am left wondering why Anas Sarwar, instead of making sure that people understand the impact of Tory decisions, wants to pretend that it does not exist.

Anas Sarwar: I will never shy away from attacking the Tories for their decisions, but this Government needs to recognise its responsibility for the decisions that it makes and the impact that they have. There is always somebody else to blame; it is always somebody else's fault. It is the same old soundbites and the same old script from this tired First Minister.

She does not want to listen to me, so maybe she should listen to the words of an ambulance driver:

"Waiting times at the Queen Elizabeth and elsewhere are not a post pandemic issue, we have been raising this for as long as I have been in the service but sadly the times are getting even longer, patients are getting sicker, and it's happening in all seasons now, not only in the winter months."

It has got so bad that ambulance workers have voted this week for strike action, not just because of pay but because they feel that they have been undervalued and underresourced for years—but this Government is in denial. There are growing queues for treatment at A and E departments, ambulances off the road for hours while trying to drop off patients and people waiting in pain for help to come.

All of that is before we have even reached the worst of winter. Lives are being lost as a result, and now the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care says that it will take another five years to fix the problem—a problem that has been 15 years in the making. After 15 years of Scottish National Party Government, why should patients in Scotland have to wait a minute longer?

The First Minister: I will always listen to those who work in our NHS, and listen very carefully because they are the experts on the situation. However, I will not insult their intelligence by pretending that the issues are easy to resolve. We will continue to support people on the front line of our national health service, with record investment supporting record recruitment into our national health service and supporting the redesign of our NHS to make sure that patients get the treatment

that they need, when and where they need it. That is in the interests of those who work in our national health service, as well.

Of course, we will continue to do everything that we possibly can to reward those who work in the NHS to the fullest possible extent. That is why the pay offer that has been made to agenda for change staff is, in Scotland, an average 7 per cent compared with 4.5 per cent in England and, indeed, in Wales, where Labour is in government. We take those responsibilities extremely seriously, every single day—every minute of every single day—but the fact of the matter is that the pressures on our national health service are not divorced from wider budgetary issues.

The Welsh Labour health minister said recently that the NHS in Wales next year would be “hell on earth” without additional funding from the United Kingdom Government. She said that the Welsh Government faces a “real nightmare” in running the NHS next year unless the UK Government steps up with additional funding. How come it is the case that Labour in Wales can recognise that reality, but Labour in Scotland is clearly so thirled to defending Tories that they are blind to that reality?

We will continue to do everything that we can in terms of the management of our national health service, but the fact of the matter is that we need more funding for our national health service and that can only come from decisions that are taken at Westminster.

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

Energy Vouchers

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): We are hearing reports that a large percentage of energy vouchers have not been redeemed by the end of October, and I have had constituents coming in to say that they have not received their vouchers. Can the Scottish Government shed any light on that and put any pressure on the energy companies to sort it out? The energy companies seem to be blaming the postal service.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am concerned to hear about experiences such as that of John Mason’s constituents. Those echo wider reports this week that a significant proportion of support in the form of prepayment vouchers has so far gone unclaimed. It may be the case that some people are choosing to hold on to the vouchers until the weather turns colder, but it would be deeply worrying for people to be going without because of delays in the system, or for other reasons beyond their control.

I have chaired two meetings with energy suppliers and advice services over the past few

weeks. Those have highlighted the need to ensure that the people who are most vulnerable are receiving the support to which they are entitled. I will continue those discussions with energy suppliers and others, but I would encourage energy companies to do everything that they can to ensure that the people who are most vulnerable are getting the maximum possible support and getting it as quickly as possible.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Patient Complaints)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): It is no secret that NHS Dumfries and Galloway is on a crisis footing. A shortage of beds, staff and cash is seeing patients failed. Just when it seemed that things could not get any worse, the health board has now confirmed that it does not even have the capacity to respond to complaints, telling patients that it can no longer give a timescale for investigating their concerns. Does the First Minister think that that is safe or acceptable and will she investigate the case of one of my constituents? She has been waiting since February to get answers as to why her surgery went wrong, and she is losing sleep knowing that the same doctor could be making the same mistake in treating other patients.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, as I often say in the chamber, I will look into any case that members of Parliament draw to my attention, so if Oliver Mundell wants to send the details of that case, I will of course ensure that it is looked into as quickly as possible.

Secondly, I expect all health boards to deal with complaints appropriately and as quickly as possible, and to communicate with patients as they do so. As I have talked about in earlier exchanges, I absolutely understand the pressures that every part of our national health service is dealing with. As I have already said many times today, I treat with the utmost seriousness the big responsibility on my shoulders and those of the Government to support, and to ensure the good management of, our NHS.

Oliver Mundell mentioned budgets. We are dealing with significant budgetary pressures, which are caused by inflation and the fact—which I do not begrudge at all—that we are trying to pay our NHS staff more. As I have said to Douglas Ross, the reality is that, had we taken the advice of the Scottish Conservatives, there would be even less money to support our NHS, because we would have given tax cuts to the richest. It is to everybody’s relief that we did not follow that call and the example of the United Kingdom Government in that regard.

Cancer Care (Inequality)

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Reports that were published this past week show that people in Scotland's most deprived areas are 74 per cent more likely to die of cancer than those in the least deprived areas. Is the First Minister content with that level of disparity in health outcomes between Scotland's richest and poorest? If not, what will the Scottish Government do about it?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): This is an important issue, although it is important to stress that mortality from cancer is reducing overall, which is due to a range of factors, such as better treatments, advances in drugs and technology and, of course, the hard work and dedication of the people who work in our cancer services.

There has been an inequality gap for a considerable time, which we are focused on closing. The factors that drive that are many and varied. Our detect cancer early programme and all the other work that we are doing to promote earlier diagnosis of cancer have a particular focus on inequality; so, too, does all the work that we do to encourage people to adopt behaviours that reduce the risk factors for cancer.

Equality in outcomes is, of course, of driving importance in all this, and that is reflected in all our work on cancer care.

Impact of Brexit

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): This week, the United Kingdom's own data shows that exports from Scotland to the European Union have slumped by more than £2.2 billion since Brexit. To put it simply, Brexit has made things worse rather than better and made the lives of people throughout Scotland more difficult. Does the First Minister agree that it is time for the Tories to call out Brexit for the act of vandalism that it is, or acknowledge their role as willing accomplices in the havoc that it has wreaked on the lives of people throughout the country?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As Evelyn Tweed was asking a really important question, a member on the Conservative benches, from a sedentary position, asked, "What has this got to do with the Scottish Parliament?" I suggest that the state of the economy, and the fact that Brexit has caused a slump in our exports to the EU and made it so much harder to recruit staff into businesses and our public services, including health and social care, has an awful lot to do with the Scottish Parliament.

Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster—a Tory-imposed disaster. We are seeing its impacts in every walk of life, from exports to the economy

and our ability to recruit into essential jobs. It is time that Brexit was reversed, but I do not expect that we will get that from the Tories and, sadly, we no longer hear that commitment from the Labour Party. The only route back into the EU for Scotland now is by becoming an independent country, and the sooner that happens, the better.

Ukrainian Refugees (Killin Hotel)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As the First Minister will be aware, refugees staying at the Killin hotel, which is in my region, were originally given four weeks' notice to quit when the Scottish Government cancelled its contract with the hotel, effective from 18 November. Since then, media interest and coverage of the plight of the refugees has resulted in what has been billed as a U-turn by the Scottish Government, which has said that it will work with the hotel to see whether the refugees can continue to stay while the Government assists them to find long-term, sustainable accommodation. However, despite the Scottish Government's reprieve, which was announced last week, neither the hotel, the local community council nor the Ukrainians have heard anything further. Many of the Ukrainians are unsure and anxious and have already resigned themselves to relocation. The situation is highly unacceptable and is causing severe distress to the individuals concerned. What action can be put in place to draw a line under the saga and give everybody the resolution that they deserve?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is our priority to ensure that people who are displaced from Ukraine are looked after and well supported here. Figures that are out just today, I think, show that, since the conflict in Ukraine began, more than 21,500 people, most of whom are sponsored by the Scottish Government, have arrived here. That represents 20.8 per cent of all United Kingdom arrivals, which is testament to our desire and determination to support people from Ukraine as far as possible.

Many of the people staying at the Killin hotel wanted to move to a more central location with easier access to amenities and employment, and, by offering accommodation in Stirling, we seek to provide exactly that. We have of course listened to those Ukrainians who wanted to stay in the Killin area, such as those with employment or children in local schools, and we will help them to do that. We are working with Stirling Council and the local community to ensure that they are supported to find suitable alternative accommodation. We are aware that some of the Ukrainians will be able to stay at the hotel while they continue to be supported to find matched or longer-term accommodation.

We will continue to support everybody who has come here from Ukraine. Part of that is about supporting them out of temporary accommodation and into more settled accommodation as quickly as possible.

Industrial Action (University of Dundee)

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Unite the union members from the University of Dundee are in their third month of industrial action in defence of their pensions. Today, a delegation of those workers is in the Parliament to provide an update on the dispute, and every MSP has received an invitation to the meeting, which will be held in committee room 2 at 1 o'clock. Can the workers count on the First Minister and her education ministers attending today's update?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I understand the frustration that people working in our university sector feel at the continued dispute about their pension arrangements. It is of course a matter for universities as the employer; the Scottish Government is not the employer in this case. However, I always encourage employers to get round the table with workers to find resolution to such disputes, and I would call on Universities Scotland to do exactly that.

Mental Health Services (Universities)

3. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has to increase and improve the provision of mental health services in Scotland's universities. (S6F-01479)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are working closely with universities to ensure that the mental health support that they have in place is responsive to student needs. Over the past three academic years, we have invested more than £11.5 million in providing almost 90 additional counsellors in colleges and universities. That exceeds our programme for government commitment to provide 80 additional counsellors and is on top of what institutions already provided. We are also working with health boards to improve referral pathways to national health service and community-based services for students who are in need of acute support. Finally, in association with stakeholders, we are developing a student mental health plan, which will provide a best practice framework for mental health services in universities and colleges and will be linked to the wider mental health and wellbeing strategy.

Stephen Kerr: The First Minister will know that the Mental Health Foundation, Universities Scotland and the Robertson Trust surveyed more than 15,000 students and found that 74 per cent reported low wellbeing, 45 per cent experienced a

serious psychological issue that they felt required professional help and 36 per cent reported experiencing either moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression.

There is a mental health crisis in our universities and colleges, and I am afraid that the actions of the First Minister in cutting the allocated funds for mental health support have made the problem worse. However, she has one chance to deal with the mess that she has created: she must guarantee that the £20 million four-year programme of sector support for student mental health will continue and not be cancelled.

Can I help the First Minister to find that £20 million? [*Interruption.*] How about the £20 million that she has earmarked for an independence referendum that the majority of Scots do not want? Will she act now to avoid a further crisis?

The First Minister: I do not want to waste too much time giving a basic lesson in financial management to the Conservatives, but money that is due to be allocated in a future financial year cannot be used to fund services in the current financial year. The fact remains that investing a very small sum of money to give the people of Scotland an alternative to Westminster mismanagement is a very good idea indeed.

On mental health, Stephen Kerr is right to point to the figures that he has narrated in the chamber today. Of course, it is, first and foremost, for individual institutions to ensure that they have in place appropriate mental health support for their students, but we are working closely with institutions to support them as they provide such support. As I said earlier, we have invested more than £11.5 million to support 90 additional counsellors in colleges and universities. In fact, we are the only United Kingdom nation to have funded student mental health support in that way, so perhaps Stephen Kerr's comments would be better directed to his own party in government at Westminster.

As regards yesterday's statement by the Deputy First Minister, spending on mental health will continue to rise. The vast majority of mental health funding is directed through national health service boards, and that is completely unaffected by anything that the Deputy First Minister announced yesterday.

I come back to the central point. We are in a situation in which we have a budget for this year that was already 2.9 per cent lower in cash terms than it was last year because of Tory Westminster decisions, but within this financial year it has been eroded by £1.7 billion due to inflation. The cost of public sector pay deals so far—I repeat that I do not grudge this—is £700 million more than was

budgeted for. Again, that has been driven by inflation.

We have no power to borrow for day-to-day services, we cannot raise tax mid-year and our reserves are fully allocated. Therefore, we have to find ways of providing funding to deal with those pressures from within existing budgets. Of course, we might face even more difficult choices when the Chancellor of the Exchequer announces his budget statement in a couple of weeks.

The fact of the matter is that, if the Conservatives—who, six weeks ago, called on us to cut public service funding to give tax cuts to the richest—want us to invest more in any element of public services, they need to persuade the chancellor to increase the budget of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. Until they do so, they will continue to have zero credibility on any matters relating to budgets or to public services in Scotland.

Living Wage

4. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what work the Scottish Government is doing to improve living wage equality. (S6F-01481)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The real living wage accreditation scheme supports employers in lower-paid sectors to become real living wage employers. Recent Office for National Statistics data shows that, in the past year, the proportion of women employees aged over 18 in Scotland who earn the real living wage or more increased by nearly 6 percentage points to 89.7 per cent, compared with 91 per cent of employees overall, and that 10.3 per cent of women in Scotland earn below the real living wage, which is lower than the equivalent United Kingdom figure of 14.3 per cent.

The data confirms that Scottish employers are leading the way in paying the living wage, and we should be proud of the progress that has been made. However, there is still a lot of work to be done to tackle gender and other pay gaps, and we will publish the refreshed fair work action plan later this year. It will address actions to further close those gaps and create more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Stephanie Callaghan: I agree that we can be rightly proud of Scotland's record on wage equality, which means that we have the highest proportion of workers in the UK who are paid above the living wage, as well as the lowest gender pay gap.

However, our progress has been impeded by a broken UK labour market. Does the First Minister agree that we can truly address wage inequality only through Scottish independence, which will

provide an opportunity to embed equality principles in our labour laws and to design a system that better meets the needs of Scotland's workers and employers? *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: I know that the Conservatives and Labour do not like hearing this, but it is a very important point that demonstrates a fundamental fact. Independence is not abstract; it is about real issues that impact on the day-to-day lives of people across Scotland.

Take the issue that is being raised here now. Employment law, including the setting of the national minimum wage, is currently reserved entirely to the UK Government. If we had employment powers lying in the hands of those in the Scottish Parliament, which would come with independence, that would enable us to do even more to protect and enhance workers' rights and to support working people across this country by ensuring that they are paid a living wage. That, in turn, would improve living standards, increase our tax take and boost our economy.

We will continue to call on the UK Government to do more and to devolve crucial powers, but the only way to get those powers—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: —which have the potential to change the lives of people across Scotland, into the hands of those in this Parliament is by Scotland becoming an independent country. That is not abstract; it is very real, and it becomes more and more obvious with every day that passes.

Malnutrition and Food Insecurity

5. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what urgent action the Scottish Government is taking to prevent poverty-related malnutrition and food insecurity, in light of reported growing concerns from healthcare workers, school staff and charities about the impact of hunger on people across Scotland. (S6F-01480)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): That may be another illustration of the point that I made in my previous answer. I am deeply concerned—as, I know, Monica Lennon and other members will be—about the hardship that people are facing as a result of the cost of living crisis. This Government has allocated almost £3 billion in this financial year to helping households to face that, including £1 billion that is not available anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That includes the Scottish child payment, which will shortly increase to £25 per week, and the Deputy First Minister confirmed yesterday that we will double the December bridging payment for families to £260 and increase the fuel insecurity fund to £20 million.

We must see the UK Government use all the levers at its disposal to tackle the emergency rather than make it worse. That must include increasing benefits in line with inflation and increasing universal credit by £25, and that should also be extended to means-tested legacy benefits. I hope that we will see the UK Government take those steps. However, if those powers lay in the hands of this Parliament, we would not have to look to a UK Government to do those things—we could do those things by our own hand.

Monica Lennon: The First Minister has set out some important context, but I hope that she agrees that there is more that we can do in this place.

Why has the working group on malnutrition, which was announced by this Government more than a year ago, not met? If it has met this week, it would be good to know about that. I know that there has been some bad publicity.

Free school meals are not yet universally available for young people in Scotland. There was a commitment to make them available for pupils in primaries 6 and 7 in August of this year, but we missed that deadline. We have heard about a pilot scheme for secondary schools. Will the First Minister give a clear timetable for the delivery of the roll-out of free school meals, and will that pilot scheme be published?

Campaigners and front-line workers with both children and older people raise the alarm every day, so I ask whether the four calls to action by the Eat Well Age Well project will be taken on board by the Government.

There is really good work on universal free school meals in Scotland, and I give credit to the Government for doing that, but we all know that we must do more, so I hope that the First Minister will set out those details very soon.

The First Minister: Monica Lennon says that we all know that we can do more here. We will always seek to do more and to do as much as we can, but there is a limit to what we can do within a fixed budget. I do not know whether Monica Lennon listened to John Swinney's statement yesterday. We are at the limit—probably beyond the limit—of what we can do financially without additional resources from Westminster. I wish it was not like that, because I wish that we were in control of our own finances, but we are not.

I turn to the specific issues that Monica Lennon raised. The date set for an initial meeting of the malnutrition working group was not suitable for some of the key participants, but we intend that the group will meet by the end of this month.

We have an ambitious plan for the roll-out of free school meals, but right now we are already

way ahead of any other part of the UK on that. In Scotland, during term time, free school meals are already universally available to more than 280,000 children in primaries 1 to 5 and in special schools, as well as to eligible pupils in P6 through to secondary 6. In England, universal provision is available only in the first three years. In Wales, where Monica Lennon's colleagues are in government, free school meal provision is based entirely on eligibility. I think that they have just started work on universal provision for the first year.

We have some way to go, but we are absolutely serious about getting to the end of this journey. However, we have already come much further than anyone else, and we are doing all of it within a budget that is being eroded by inflation and that is essentially fixed. If Monica Lennon wants us to do much more and to do it faster, it is not enough for Scottish Labour to will the end; it must also will the means. That will involve giving the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government full control over our own finances instead of leaving us at the mercy of Tory Governments at Westminster.

Glasgow Climate Pact

6. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government will be building on the legacy from the Glasgow climate pact by attending the 27th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP27—in Egypt. (S6F-01477)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Scotland is determined to continue to play its part in responding to the global climate emergency. If the world is to deliver on the Glasgow climate pact, all nations need to continue to increase their ambition and take credible action to reach net zero emissions.

Over the next few days, I will attend COP27 to do what I can to further collaboration between Scotland and other countries, to build on the agreements that were reached in Glasgow and to continue Scotland's leadership not least on the issue of loss and damage funding. Although we are not yet a member state of the United Nations or party to the Paris agreement, Scotland will play its part by sharing our own experiences of delivering against a net zero target at home, as part of our just transition, and by helping to amplify the voices of people who are being most impacted by climate change, who are often also excluded from the debate. They include people from the countries of the global south, women and young people.

Mark Ruskell: I am pleased that, unlike the Prime Minister, the First Minister did not have to be shamed into attending COP27.

COP26 in Glasgow showed us that, when small nations work together, they can lead the world on climate justice. Alongside Scotland's leadership on loss and damage funding, which the First Minister mentioned, Denmark helped to launch the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance and was joined by a flotilla of countries that are planning for a fair and fast phasing out of fossil fuels.

Now that the Scottish Government has a clearer position on ending new coal extraction, is it ready to join that alliance and show the global leadership that is desperately needed on a just oil and gas transition?

The First Minister: At COP26, in Glasgow last year, we had good engagement with those involved in the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance, including its founder country, Denmark, and we will continue that. Last year, we set out the programme of work that we are undertaking, which will influence and ultimately decide our involvement in the alliance. We are undertaking in-depth analysis to better understand our energy requirements as we transition to net zero, ensuring an approach that supports and protects our energy security and our workforce while meeting our climate obligations. We will publish an energy strategy and our first just transition plan, which will provide a road map for the energy sector's role in meeting our emissions reduction targets and securing a net zero energy system for Scotland.

Taking all of that into account, we will continue to engage constructively with the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance as part of the wider programme of analysis and engagement with a range of organisations and stakeholders.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Given the publication at the weekend of three new UN reports stating that there is no clear pathway to the 1.5°C limit being set, and given the devastating floods in Pakistan that were caused by climate change, will the First Minister set out what more can and should be done at COP27, particularly on loss and damage funding? Does she agree with me that people and countries in the global south must be given due attention and that there must be action by the global north? In welcoming the now planned attendance by the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, will she urge all global north leaders to act on the issues that are already being faced by countries in the global south?

The First Minister: Yes, I absolutely agree with that. Countries in the global north have a moral obligation and owe that to those in the global south, including action on the issue of loss and damage. Good progress was made in Glasgow last year to put the issue of loss and damage firmly on the agenda. I think that we all wish that we could have gone further, but it is vital that this year's COP delivers implementation of the

Glasgow pact. That includes delivering, in particular, the finance that is needed to enable global south nations to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

However, that is not enough. We need further action on loss and damage. I think that we can be very proud of the commitment and leadership that Scotland showed on the issue last year, which was followed by commitments from Denmark, Wallonia and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation. We hope that, this year, other Governments will follow suit and help us to mobilise funding to address the losses and damages that people and communities in the global south are suffering right now as a result of climate change, which is caused largely by the global north. In my view, that is one of the big tests for COP27, and I hope that it meets that test in full.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am sure that the First Minister will agree that, if we cannot do the basics of tackling climate change, Scotland will have no chance of achieving net zero. When will the 2013 target of recycling 50 per cent of household waste be met?

The First Minister: Scotland is doing more than the basics of tackling climate change. I will write to the member with an update in response to his specific question.

Scotland is rightly seen by countries around the world as a leader on these issues. We should continue to challenge ourselves at home and ensure that we are delivering against the targets that we have set, and we will always do that. However, we should also take some pride in the fact that other countries look to Scotland for the leadership that we show—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, First Minister. I am sure that we would like to hear a response to the member's question.

The First Minister: The Tories are always very keen to talk down Scotland's contribution. I think that, at COP27, we will see countries around the world talking Scotland up, because they see the leadership that this country offers.

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

Point of Order

12:52

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Ahead of Tuesday's meeting of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, members were informed that the deadline for amendments at stage 2 of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill would be just two weeks after the stage 1 vote. We were told that there would be just two sittings in which to consider the amendments.

That is unacceptable. It is far too little time, and I am concerned about the quality of the information that I was given by the convener when I questioned the decision on Tuesday. It looks like an attempt to limit or even to shut down debate on a very complex and contentious bill. Rushing this legislation is wrong when fundamental issues of women's rights and trans rights are at stake.

Presiding Officer, first, what steps are available to members who wish to prevent the bill from being rushed through with very little debate? Secondly, what action can you personally take to ensure that the timetable for the rest of the bill stages is not limited? Thirdly, do you agree that, on such a sensitive topic, the Scottish Parliament should seek to protect and enhance its reputation by scrutinising the legislation properly for as long as is necessary?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank the member for her point of order. It is for the Parliamentary Bureau to consider and recommend to the Parliament deadlines for the different stages of bills. The Parliamentary Bureau will consider the timetabling of stage 2 of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill at its meeting next Tuesday. The member may wish to ask her business manager to raise the matters that she has highlighted at that point, in the discussions at the bureau next week.

12:54

Meeting suspended.

12:55

On resuming—

Cancer Card

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-04821, in the name of Miles Briggs, on Cancer Card. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to participate should press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the tremendous work by Jen Hardy in establishing Cancer Card in Scotland, which is an initiative that provides people with access to vital cancer support services and information regarding their diagnosis in one place; understands that, after her own incurable breast cancer diagnosis in 2017, Jen was struck by the realisation that there was no single place for her to obtain useful information related to her illness, which motivated her to establish Cancer Card; further understands that this community can help people diagnosed with cancer, including people in the Lothian region, to find the support that they require, minimising stress during an already highly stressful time; recognises that Cancer Card attained charity status in 2021; considers that it can play an integral role in securing relief and comfort to cancer patients, and welcomes the appointment of Ian Pirrie as Cancer Card's first CEO.

12:56

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I start by thanking members for supporting my motion for debate today. I also want to invite members to attend the photo call that will take place on the garden lobby steps at 1.35, following the debate. I hope that members will be able to join us.

I think that we would all agree that one of the greatest honours that come with being an MSP is the opportunity that it presents to meet remarkable people. One such person is Jen Hardy, and I am delighted that she has joined us today in the public gallery, alongside Ian Pirrie, the new chief executive officer of Cancer Card.

I first met Jen Hardy in March 2018, when she successfully campaigned alongside women with incurable breast cancer and the Breast Cancer Now charity to help to deliver access to the secondary breast cancer drug Perjeta. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary said that those discussions continue, and I note that, yesterday, he engaged with the continuing campaigning work of Breast Cancer Now.

Jen was diagnosed with stage 4 incurable breast cancer on 18 October 2017, after having a CT scan to find out the cause of her paralysed vocal cord. While searching for cancer support, she noticed that there was no single place or

online resource that listed the hundreds of different support services, support providers, information channels and free experiences that are available to people living with cancer, and their families.

It was that realisation that prompted Jen, who has an information technology background, to work to establish Cancer Card in order to create a single online point of access for anyone who is affected by cancer so that they can find the help and support that they need. Cancer Card, which was launched in May 2022, provides a detailed index of support services that are available, helping individuals navigate what can often be a complicated and complex world of cancer.

It is hard to believe that something like Cancer Card did not exist until now. I know that it is incredibly hard to have the difficult conversations with someone living with cancer about their treatment journey and, indeed, to ask the many personal questions that a wife, husband, mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son or friend might want to ask. That is where Cancer Card is so wonderful: it recognises the questions and support that are involved in reaching more than just the person living with cancer but their families, friends, employers and professionals. It is available any time of day or night, when questions might be asked or answers or support might be sought. It also acts as a directory of key contacts for all United Kingdom cancer charities and support services.

One in two of us will develop cancer in our lifetimes. Over the past six years, in my time as co-chair of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on cancer—alongside Jackie Baillie—one of the regular requests of many clinicians, charities and groups has been for access to the support services to be improved and made more readily available. That is what Cancer Card offers.

The significant impact of a cancer diagnosis on an individual's life is immense, with the potential to render them feeling lost, frustrated, fatigued, isolated or financially disadvantaged when trying to obtain information of a non-medical but nonetheless essential nature. At a time when people living with cancer, and their families, need the most support, it can often be difficult to find the right information at the right time for the right person.

Cancer Card seeks to address that through the online support hub, where those affected by cancer find invaluable insights from the Cancer Card community and access to local and national cancer support charities and services, including financial help, exercise classes, counselling and local support networks. The advanced search and filtering options allow users to create a bespoke search based on their individual needs. That is

very important. I ask those who have not had the opportunity to see cancercard.org.uk for themselves to visit it, please.

I pay tribute to and thank all the charities and organisations that provide information, help and advice to people and families living with cancer. We owe those organisations a huge debt of gratitude. The difference that they make to people's lives, including those living with cancer, is significant across our country.

I believe that Cancer Card can and will elevate cancer support charities and services and help to promote their invaluable offering. There is no cost to users or charities for the services that are listed. That presents a great opportunity for local groups to highlight what is available in different localities across Scotland.

The Scottish Government is currently undertaking work on the new cancer strategy, which I welcome. That presents an opportunity to reset and reconsider how support and advice are provided in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and especially to reconsider how, during and following the pandemic, access has shifted online. I hope that the new strategy can embrace Cancer Card and that the fresh new approach can provide the information and advice services that people living with cancer and their families and friends so desperately need and want to access.

I thank members for allowing this debate to take place, and I look forward to hearing the contributions to it.

13:01

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Miles Briggs on securing debating time this afternoon.

We all know that cancer is one of the major causes of disease and death in Scotland, with more than 30,000 patients diagnosed and more than 16,000 people dying of cancer recorded every year. Sadly, half of us will be diagnosed with cancer at some stage in our lives.

Unfortunately, unprecedented challenges with the Covid-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on cancer treatment. The impacts range from temporary pauses in screening programmes to longer waits for CT scans and colonoscopies. That threatens the steady progress that has been made in cutting cancer mortality rates in recent years.

New research that was published in *The Lancet Oncology* on Monday showed that countries with cancer policies that are consistent over time are more successful in improving survival across a range of cancer types. Scotland has fared better than other UK nations, but it still lags behind

countries such as Denmark, which has among the highest increases in survival rates after maintaining a cross-party consensus on policy and the level of investment required.

That said, I welcome the establishment of Cancer Card in Scotland and congratulate Jen Hardy on her tireless work in setting up that online hub after having been diagnosed with stage 4 incurable metastatic breast cancer in October 2017. Through her lived experience and by navigating the information and support available, she found that there was no all-encompassing hub to bring together the numerous cancer charities and support services that are out there. That gap is what Cancer Card seeks to fill, and does fill.

What I found particularly interesting in browsing the new Cancer Card website is how easy it is now to find the tailored support that is right for each individual, as Miles Briggs highlighted, depending on the type of cancer that the person or a loved one has, their location and their relationship with cancer. Being diagnosed with cancer is, understandably, a huge shock to most people, and easy access to the right resource will make an already highly stressful and worrying time a little less difficult. Videos and blogs from people who have survived cancer can also help to provide some reassurance.

In 2010, my twin sister had breast cancer that was so virulent that she was operated on within 72 hours of her initial diagnosis. Janis had radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and she has now been cancer free for more than 11 years. The big C, as John Wayne famously used to call it, need not be a terminal diagnosis if it is caught early and/or treated aggressively.

I also welcome Cancer Card's vision of supporting everyone who is affected by cancer, with help being directed to not only the patients but their partners, family members, friends and, indeed, employers. I hope that the new directory will be of assistance to my constituents by signposting them to the numerous amazing local charities and support services that are available across Ayrshire and Arran. Those include Ayrshire Cancer Support, which is Ayrshire's leading cancer charity. It provides practical help and emotional support to people who are affected by cancer, including transport and complementary therapies.

The same applies to Arran Cancer Support Trust, which supports cancer patients and their families with the unique challenges that island life can pose. Not only does the trust offer counselling and wellbeing support, but volunteers pick up Arranachs at Ardrossan harbour, take them to the mainland hospital and wait or come back to take them on the return ferry to Arran, where transport can also be arranged to and from the ferry

terminal. I thank everyone who is involved in local charities for their efforts and indeed everyone in the third sector, which is a vitally important partner for the national health service in our efforts to combat cancer.

I have no doubt that Cancer Card will play a vital role in improving the access of patients, as well as family members and friends, to the many vital resources that are out there, signposting them to the local charity or support service that is best suited to their needs. I will certainly do my bit to make my constituents aware of the help that Cancer Card can offer.

Once again, I congratulate Jen Hardy on setting up Cancer Card and I congratulate Miles Briggs on bringing this important topic to the chamber.

13:05

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I also congratulate Miles Briggs on having secured this debate to celebrate the work of Cancer Card.

With one in two of us being diagnosed with cancer in our lifetime, not many of us can say that we have not been touched by cancer. Whether it is a personal story or that of family or friends, the experience is real and is often very difficult. A cancer diagnosis comes with a whirlwind of emotion. There is an overwhelming amount of information to take in at once, accompanied by worries about loved ones and concerns around finances—especially now, during the cost of living crisis. Of course, a cancer diagnosis also has an impact on work, because many people have to give up employment for a time.

Despite the support that is available, the landscape is new and it is very difficult to navigate for the person who has just had a diagnosis. That is where Cancer Card comes in. It is an online hub that brings together all the information that people need. I join others in congratulating Jen Hardy, Ian Pirrie and the team, because they have managed the quite remarkable task of pulling together all the information so that people can find out all that they need to know about receiving support once they have received their diagnosis. That helping hand is invaluable in making people feel less alone at such a hard time.

We are all aware of the pressures that are being faced by our health service, so the work of Cancer Card is needed now more than ever. Figures for the quarter ending 30 June 2022 show that performance against the 62-day cancer waiting times target was at its lowest point since records began, with just 76 per cent of patients starting treatment within that target time. It is a target that, regrettably, has never been met, so we need collectively to do more to deal with that.

We are also seeing the toll that lockdown has taken on early diagnosis of cancer, with more people presenting with late-stage cancers than were doing so before lockdown. It is against that backdrop that Cancer Card's work truly shines. It is a light in the dark, offering advice and lived experience, as well as helping people and their families to navigate this new world. It also supports staff, who are stretched to the limit.

Cancer Card is not alone in carrying out that vital work. I want to recognise organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support, which is there to assist people in whatever ways are necessary when their lives have been turned upside down, whether they are having issues with finances or struggling with their mental health, and Marie Curie, which provides overnight palliative care for cancer patients at home as well as in its valuable hospice provision. Marie Curie nurses care for people in 31 out of 32 local authority areas in Scotland and the charity's work ensures that vital research into palliative and end-of-life care continues to be a priority. Of course, Cancer Research UK, together with clinicians, does similarly important work looking at how to improve treatments for the future, and funding scientists, doctors and nurses to help to beat cancer sooner.

The work of those charities and many more makes an immeasurable difference to the lives of people across the country. They do it because they care and because many of the people in those charities have experienced the effects of a cancer diagnosis at first hand. We must continue to support charities such as Cancer Card because, from 2015 to 2019, something like 141,000 adults in Scotland received a cancer diagnosis and the number shows no sign of decreasing anytime soon.

Presiding Officer, the fight against cancer continues, but thanks to the work of Cancer Card and other charities, people's battles are not fought alone. For that, we thank them.

13:09

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Miles Briggs on having secured the debate. I wanted to speak because most of us will have been affected by cancer in some way—either through ourselves, our families or other people who are close to us being diagnosed. I am no exception, but I will not regale members with a personal story today. We all know about cancer and the effects that it can have.

I had a look at the Cancer Card website. It was not clear to me that there is a card involved; however, there is one, and Miles Briggs handed it to me earlier. I think that the idea is that when a person anywhere in Scotland is diagnosed with

cancer, they will be given a card. There is a barcode on the back, which can be scanned and takes the user to a website. I have tried it and it works. When someone gets to the website, as we have heard, it is a one-stop shop of services across Scotland. It is a fantastic resource that can be built on, because when someone is diagnosed with cancer, there is a feeling of despair and "What do I do now?" People really need to know where to turn.

The website is very good, because it is localised and there are services throughout Scotland. In my own patch, which is Lanarkshire, places such as Kilbryde Hospice, Lanarkshire Cancer Care Trust, Lanarkshire Carers, Lanarkshire's Speak Easy cancer support group—which is for people who have throat cancer—Maggie's Lanarkshire, Leukaemia Care, move more North Lanarkshire, and Strathcarron Hospice are listed. Of course, there will be more groups out there.

The website is really good, and I congratulate Jen Hardy on getting it set up. We can build on it, and it needs to be promoted. What we actually need—I do not know whether this is in place yet—is everyone who has a cancer diagnosis, as I described at the start of my speech, being given a card so that they are signposted to local and national services. I think that that will be a great comfort and help to people.

Once again, I congratulate Miles Briggs and I congratulate Jen Hardy on getting the service going.

13:12

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I congratulate and thank Miles Briggs for securing debating time on an important subject—one that is, going by the contributions, clearly and unsurprisingly close to everyone's hearts, for many personal reasons. Even if someone has not had personal experience of cancer or has not had someone close to them experience it, hearing the stories of people who have had a cancer diagnosis and the challenges that they have had to face over the years will often move us to tears.

I offer my full support for everything that has been said by all members who have contributed to the debate. I join each and every one of them in paying tribute to Jen Hardy, who is in the gallery, alongside Ian Pirrie, the first CEO of Cancer Card. Miles Briggs is right that there are tough times in the job, for sure, but one of the best parts of it for all of us as members of the Scottish Parliament is getting to meet people and hear their phenomenal stories.

I enjoy meeting everyone, of course, but there are certain people who have an energy about

them and immediately light up the room, and that energy stays with you for quite a while. I can think of a number of people I have met over the years who are like that, and Jen Hardy is absolutely one of them. I met her only yesterday, but I could feel her enthusiasm for what she does and her energy in wanting to improve the lives of, and give support to, those who have had a cancer diagnosis.

Thankfully, I have never had a personal diagnosis—I have known many people close to me who have—but nobody would have faulted Jen Hardy for just getting on with life in her own way and dealing with the difficulties that a diagnosis such as hers throws up. She is undoubtedly getting on with life, but what she is also doing—and doing very well—is supporting others through her efforts with Cancer Card. For that and the fact that she is using her time to ensure that people right across the country receive support, I pay her all the tribute in the world that I possibly can.

I want to pick up on a couple of points that colleagues have raised in the debate. As I have seen in my time as an MSP and in government, the best ideas are always the most simple ones. We can all think of such examples. One great example is Mary's Meals—a simple but so effective concept—and Cancer Card is in the same bracket. Its simple idea is to have a one-stop shop of information for people to access. Those who have not gone on to the Cancer Card website should do so; all that people have to do is put in their location and some basic information about the cancer that they are suffering from or want support for, and, with a click, they are on a webpage that provides access to and sets out contact details for the support groups that are closest to them. It is a simple but really effective idea.

What I have heard from a number of third sector cancer support organisations and charities is that people do not hear about that sort of support until they are well on in their cancer journey. When I recently visited the Maggie's centre in Edinburgh—which will be known to many and might well have been visited by a number of members across the chamber—the people there told me that they would not need to do any fundraising if they had a pound for every time somebody walked through the door and said, "Oh, I wish I'd known about you guys sooner." We do not want that to be the case. We want people to get information when they are diagnosed so that, as Graham Simpson rightly said, they can access support right away.

We have to think about the point that Jackie Baillie made—and made well—about many people who get such a diagnosis going into almost a state of shock and not necessarily absorbing all the information that they receive. It is therefore really

important that we and the NHS follow things up with those individuals and ensure that they get the information that they need about support—and not just that one time when they get the card, although that is an excellent idea that I will take away and address shortly. We should be going back again and again to ensure that those individuals get the support that they require.

As for Miles Briggs's very reasonable question about the new cancer strategy, I think that the debate is taking place at a really opportune time, given that the strategy is very much in its development phase. Many organisations and individuals have inputted into the consultation on the strategy, and I give Mr Briggs an absolute commitment that a key part of it will be access to support. Indeed, having met Jen Hardy and Breast Cancer Now yesterday, we are considering how Cancer Card can be part of the support that is offered.

Another issue is how we ensure that our clinical colleagues know about Cancer Card. It is all fine and well our knowing about it and the public knowing about it, but it is really important for our clinicians to know about it, too. After all, they are often the ones who have to give people the difficult news about a cancer diagnosis.

I agree with the points that have been made about third sector support being more important than ever before. I think that that was the case before the pandemic, but it has become exceptionally important in the light of the challenges that the pandemic has brought to bear on us.

I also agree with the importance of early diagnosis. That is why we are investing in our rapid cancer diagnostic services. Indeed, the First Minister has just announced two additional services to ensure that people can get a diagnosis sooner. After all, we know as a result of really difficult decisions that we had to make during the pandemic that there is a backlog in cancer diagnostics.

I end where I started, by commending Jen Hardy for her work on Cancer Card and for what has been achieved so far through what is a really easy-to-use website. I should say to Graham Simpson that it is a QR code rather than a barcode on the back of the card—we will bring him kicking and screaming into the 21st century yet. If people scan that code, they will get immediate access to the website.

The website does not just focus on patients; it also gives access to support for partners, families and employers, all of whom have different support and information needs. The resource is a fantastic addition to the support that we already provide. As I said, I have given a commitment to consider how

we can incorporate it in our future work on our cancer strategy.

Again, I thank Miles Briggs for securing time for the debate, and I congratulate Jen Hardy and the team at Cancer Card for all the incredible work that they have done. I wish her the best of health in the future, and I wish the Cancer Card charity every success in the future. I am certain that its work will help a great many people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. A whole new exciting world of QR codes has just opened up for Mr Simpson.

That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:20

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-06596, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to today's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 3 November 2022—

after

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

followed by Appointment of Junior Scottish Minister

delete

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero, Energy and Transport

insert

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero, Energy and Transport—
[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Junior Minister

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-06595, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on appointment of a junior Scottish minister. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:30

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am very pleased to move the motion in my name, that Elena Whitham be appointed as a Scottish junior minister.

Before I do so, I thank Ash Regan for her contributions to the Scottish Government. During her time as Minister for Community Safety, Ash worked across a wide range of important issues, such as tackling inequality in the justice system and introducing and seeing being passed new legislation to restrict the sale and use of fireworks. In thanking her, I also wish her all the best for the future.

I turn to today's appointment. It gives me great pleasure to seek Parliament's agreement to the appointment of Elena Whitham. Although she is relatively new to Parliament, I have no doubt that she brings significant experience to the wide-ranging role of community safety minister.

Elena has spoken of how her political convictions have been shaped by her own life experiences growing up in a loving family that was often blighted by poverty and real hardship, which eventually forced them to emigrate to Canada when she was just six years old. Elena returned to Scotland after graduating from university. She worked in community youth and homelessness roles, and ran three businesses as a sole trader.

She also spent over a decade as a Scottish Women's Aid worker in Ayrshire, supporting women and children who experienced domestic abuse. More recently, Elena has served as the depute leader of East Ayrshire Council and was community wellbeing spokesperson for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Since becoming a member of the Scottish Parliament last year, Elena has greatly impressed both her colleagues and, I hope, her political opponents with her robust and fair convenership of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

Finally, Elena is, I think, the only person in the chamber who has campaigned in independence referendums on both sides of the Atlantic, having been involved as a student in the 1995 Quebec independence vote. The yes side, of course, lost that referendum by the narrowest of margins. Without swaying too much into constitutional

politics, let me just say that I am confident that for Elena it will, on the referendum front, be third time lucky.

It is often said that people rightly place huge priority on politicians' having real-life experience. If that is the case, Elena's political, professional and, indeed, personal experiences make her overwhelmingly qualified for ministerial office. She has proved herself to be a hard-working and capable public servant, and I am sure that everyone in the chamber will give her their best wishes.

I ask Parliament to agree that I seek the King's approval for the appointment of Elena Whitham as a junior Scottish minister.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that Elena Whitham be appointed as a junior Scottish Minister.

14:34

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I echo the First Minister's congratulations to her newest minister, Elena Whitham. I also commend the First Minister for displaying her customary good humour and collegiate warmth in the text of her letter to the outgoing minister, Ash Regan. The letter was short, but I am not sure that it was sweet, so it is no wonder that ministerial resignations are a rare event in her Government.

On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I join the First Minister in congratulating Elena Whitham on her new role. Despite a long period in Canada, she is deeply rooted in the community that she represents. The new Minister for Community Safety served as a Scottish Women's Aid worker in Ayrshire for more than a decade, so she is experienced in the sensitive and important issues relating to her new role.

Like the First Minister, I also note that in the 1995 referendum, Ms Whitham was a campaigner in favour of an independent Quebec, so can I wish her the same success in any similar future referendum, should it ever arise.

I also pay tribute to Ash Regan. It is not common for Scottish National Party MSPs to think independently of the First Minister, let alone to resign from her Government, so I thank her for her integrity, her principled honesty and, of course, her bravery.

There is an irony in a Minister for Community Safety resigning on an issue that is, ostensibly, one of community safety. She took a principled stand—something that, sadly, we do not see enough of in public life today. There is also irony in that the minister who sought to ban fireworks went out with a bang the week before Guy Fawkes

night. She lit the First Minister's blue touchpaper but, judging by her press conference this week, she is clearly not going to retire to a safe distance.

I also take the opportunity to commiserate with those bright, aspiring and ambitious SNP backbenchers who are still hoping to have their first ride in a ministerial limousine—Christine Grahame, Paul McLennan, Kenny Gibson, Stuart McMillan, John Mason and Michelle Thomson, among others. I am sure that their time will come. Indeed, it might come sooner than they think; it might come as soon as stage 3 of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill later this month, when the First Minister might receive a further round of ministerial resignations.

In closing on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I wish Elena Whitham well. It is an important position that she takes on for the communities that we represent, so we wish her well in it.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-06595, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on appointment of a junior Scottish minister, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Elena Whitham be appointed as a junior Scottish Minister.

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero, Energy and Transport

14:37

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is net zero, energy and transport. I ask members who wish to ask a supplementary question to please press their request-to-speak button or to indicate so in the chat function by entering the letters RTS during the relevant question.

As ever, I make a plea for succinct questions and answers so that we can get in as many members as possible.

Water Rates 2023-24

1. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will instruct Scottish Water to freeze water rates for 2023-24 to help with the cost of living crisis. (S6O-01492)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not think that the minister's card is in.

Jackie Baillie: He said yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It will be for the cabinet secretary to indicate what his response is, Ms Baillie.

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): There we go.

The decision on water charges is a matter for Scottish Water's board, but it must be taken with due regard to the principles of charging for water services that have been set by Scottish ministers, including the key principle of affordability.

Jackie Baillie: My understanding is that the cabinet secretary intervened last year, and I encourage him to do so again this year, because inflation was at 10 per cent in September and is expected to be at least 11 per cent by the end of the year. The pricing formula agreed between the cabinet secretary, Scottish Water and the Water Industry Commission for Scotland is that prices will rise by the consumer prices index plus 2 per cent. That will mean an eye-watering rise of 12 or 13 per cent for every household in Scotland. With Scottish Water having reserves of more than half a billion pounds and paying senior executives eye-watering bonuses of £90,000 each, it can clearly afford to freeze water bills. Households are struggling.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Baillie, could we have a question, please?

Jackie Baillie: It is entirely within the cabinet secretary's power to freeze bills, so let me try again. Will the cabinet secretary freeze water bills?

Michael Matheson: Let me try to deal with some of the facts. Ms Baillie will be well aware that Scottish Water payment levels are some of the lowest in the United Kingdom because of the way in which the organisation operates.

It is wrong for Ms Baillie to portray the cash in hand with which Scottish Water operates as spare money that sits in a bank account. That money is substantially allocated to projects in order to meet Scottish Water's net zero targets, improve services overall and deal with emergencies.

The third thing that Ms Baillie chooses to ignore is that our substantial water rates reduction scheme discount was extended to 35 per cent from the 25 per cent that was in place previously, which means that almost half a million homes benefit from the scheme—I think that some 460,000 homes benefit, of which 370,000 will pay less in water rates in this financial year.

I assure Ms Baillie that we will continue to ensure that there is the right capital investment in Scottish Water, while making rates affordable for Scottish households.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Unlike the situation elsewhere in the UK, Scottish Water is publicly owned. The Scottish Government continues to use its limited budget and constrained powers to cushion the impact of UK Government policies, which are at the heart of the cost of living crisis.

My understanding is that the water charges reduction scheme discount has increased from 25 to 35 per cent. The scheme targets support to households with the lowest income, which is clearly a key priority during the cost of living crisis.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I have a question please, Ms Don?

Natalie Don: How many households does the Scottish Government estimate are being helped through that initiative?

Michael Matheson: We have extended the water rates discount scheme, which aligns with the council tax reduction scheme. Overall, about 460,000 homes will benefit from the scheme. As a result of an extension of the scheme by Scottish Water and the Scottish Government, some 370,000 homes—those households that have a full council tax reduction discount—will pay less this year than they did in 2020-21, and a further 130,000 households that benefit from some level of council tax reduction will have enhanced reductions in their water charges.

That is how we have sought to ensure that the support targets households that are the most vulnerable financially. The scheme, alongside the other discount measures to support customers, costs us in the region of £182 million each year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 2 is from Alex Cole-Hamilton, who joins us remotely.

Sewage Discharge

2. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to address the discharge of sewage into rivers, lochs and waterways. (S6O-01493)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): In a statement to Parliament in December 2021, I set out how, backed by more than £600 million, Scottish Water had upgraded 104 waste-water treatment works and 279 storm overflows since 2010, and how that had taken us to a figure of 66 per cent in relation to good water quality in Scotland, compared with only 16 per cent in England.

I went on to confirm that Scottish Water, backed by another half a billion pounds, would undertake another suite of works in the 2021 to 2026 regulatory period. The work focuses on improving remaining waste-water treatment works and 26 priority storm overflows, and on developing solutions for the others.

Scottish Water intends to publish its first progress report on its "Improving Urban Waters—Route Map" by 21 December, which will be the first anniversary of my statement to Parliament that set out the route map.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: In my members' business debate last week, at which the minister was present, I highlighted the issue of raw sewage, sanitary towels and wet wipes being routinely discharged into Scotland's waterways. We know that that happened at least 12,000 times in 2020. However, as Scottish Water monitored only 3 per cent of releases or spills, the actual figure is likely to be exponentially higher.

It is even happening at 49 of the 87 designated bathing waters, including Loch Leven, which has four layers of environmental protection. When I raised the issue with the minister last week, she said that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency had

"found no evidence of sewage debris or pollution in the water course before it entered Loch Leven."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2022; c 111-12.]

Would the minister be comfortable going for a swim in Loch Leven?

Màiri McAllan: I would love to have the time to go for a swim in Loch Leven.

I reiterate what I said during Alex Cole-Hamilton's members' business debate, which is that, following the incident on 8 September, SEPA inspected the location and

"found no evidence of sewage debris or pollution in the water course before it entered Loch Leven."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2022; c 111-12.]

The discussion that he and I had during the debate was about the way in which we refer to the instances that happen and the very specific nature of what is and is not being discharged into the environment.

Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned monitoring, which is an important point. As part of Scottish Water's improving urban waters route map, we will design monitors for more areas and better communication with the public. We have taken a strategic decision in the past to invest in improving storm overflows, not just in monitoring the problem.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Loch Leven is a beauty spot in my constituency so, naturally, I followed with great concern Alex Cole-Hamilton's claims following the reporting around the matter. There are figures that clearly indicate that Scotland's water environment is classified as being in good condition and ahead of both the European average and the average south of the border. Can I ask the First Minister—sorry, I promoted her there; I meant the minister—what further work the Scottish Government will undertake to build on that and to ensure the continued protection of our water environment, including Loch Leven?

Màiri McAllan: I clarify again that SEPA inspected the location and

"found no evidence of sewage debris or pollution in the water course before it entered Loch Leven",

because there was no discharge of untreated raw sewage from Kinross sewage works into the adjacent water course.

On improving our water environment, our river basin management plans, which we published on 21 December, set out for each of the four key water environment themes how, by 2027, we will improve water quality from 87 to 92 per cent good, water quantity from 90 to 96 per cent good, fish migration from 88 to 99 per cent good and physical condition from 90 to 92 per cent good. Despite the overall picture in Scotland being very good, we are not complacent and are driving further improvements.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In last week's debate, I made the point that, as only 10 per cent of sewage overflows are monitored in

Scotland, it is likely that the data that is gathered underrepresents the problem, as Alex Cole-Hamilton has said. That makes the minister's comparisons with England, where 80 per cent of sewage overflows are monitored, a completely false equivalence. Will the minister, having reflected on the debate, now look to increase monitoring to the 80 per cent level that we see elsewhere?

Màiri McAllan: I have already confirmed that we have in place plans to improve monitoring as part of the overall picture of improving the situation. I do not need to reflect on the exchange during the debate, because my response now is exactly the same as it was then: the 66 per cent figure in relation to good water quality is not based on the monitoring of combined sewer overflows or the sewage system in general. It is based on the four constituent parts of a good water environment, which, as I have mentioned, are water quality, water quantity, fish migration and physical condition. All those factors together, not monitoring sewage overflows, create the 66 per cent figure.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Loch Leven is one of Scotland's best wild swimming spots, but we are seeing unacceptable discharges and environmental quality. Down the road in Kinghorn, huge improvements in water quality have resulted from the beach being designated as a bathing water area. What consideration has been given to establishing Loch Leven and other freshwater sites in Scotland as bathing water areas?

Màiri McAllan: I have rehearsed one or two of the points about Loch Leven, so I will not go over them again. Bathing water areas are designated by Scottish ministers for areas where they expect a large number of people to bathe, having regard to past trends, the infrastructure or facilities that are provided and other measures to promote bathing. Any organisation or individual can submit for consideration a bathing water area designation form, which is available on SEPA's website. In Scotland, we currently have three inland freshwater bathing water areas, which are at Luss on Loch Lomond, Loch Morlich near Aviemore and Dores on Loch Ness.

Active Travel (Stirling)

3. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what investment is being made in safe active travel routes in the Stirling area, including any missing links in the national cycle network at Manor Powis and between Doune and Callander. (S6O-01494)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The Government is investing up to £9.9

million in active travel routes in the Stirling area through the places for everyone programme and investment in the national cycle network. Projects at Manor Powis and between Doune and Callander have committed funding totalling £170,000. Additionally, in the current financial year, more than £600,000 has been awarded directly to Stirling Council through the cycling, walking and safer routes grant.

Evelyn Tweed: My constituent Christina Mackenzie recently suffered significant injuries while cycling near Kippen. Although active travel routes are welcome, there are still issues around awareness of cyclists. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to educate people on safe use of roads for all users?

Patrick Harvie: I read about the incident that affected Ms Mackenzie. First and foremost, I extend to her my good wishes for a speedy recovery and a return to record-breaking ways.

I make it very clear that involvement in a hit-and-run incident such as the one that affected Ms Mackenzie is a serious offence. It is in all road users' interests that those responsible are held to account for that crime and that they face the consequences of their actions.

Road Safety Scotland has developed a significant number of social marketing campaigns to address those behaviours that cause the most harm on our roads. We also invest £400,000 a year in the give me cycle space campaign, which raises awareness among drivers of the need to give at least 1.5m when overtaking people on bikes. The campaign, which runs on television, radio, social media and physical advertising, recorded more than 140 million impressions last year. Post-campaign analysis shows that awareness of the issues raised has increased significantly, with more than 90 per cent of respondents agreeing with the overall message.

The Government is committed to the vision and aspirations of the road safety framework to 2030. Fundamental to that is the adoption of the safe system approach. One of the five pillars of that system is safe road users.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, will you please wind up your response?

Patrick Harvie: Recognising that road safety is also a life skill, the Scottish Government, through Road Safety Scotland, has invested in a suite of online learning resources for young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. We are a wee bit pressed for time.

Rail Workers (Pay)

4. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government what its position is regarding the impact in Scotland of calls by rail workers for fair pay settlements. (S6O-01495)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I agree with those calls. It is unacceptable that Network Rail employees have not had a pay rise in the past two years, unlike workers at ScotRail. I have written several times to United Kingdom Government ministers to urge them to support negotiations to encourage the reaching of a settlement.

The Westminster Government's position contrasts with ours. We managed to secure a pay settlement with the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen—ASLEF, the train drivers union—and we continue to work with ScotRail to reach an agreement with the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. I encourage the RMT's UK leadership to allow its ScotRail members the opportunity to vote on the newly enhanced offer.

Richard Leonard: Back on 21 June, the Scottish Government resilience room was assembled, the Minister for Transport wrote to the UK Government and the Deputy First Minister took to the media to denounce the UK Government. Let me quote him. He said:

“there needs to be more urgency”.

He warned the UK Government to

“get this situation fixed—and fast.”

The lack of action by the UK Government over rail strikes was, he thundered, “a dereliction of duty”, and he was right, but now, four months later, ScotRail workers have been forced to take industrial action for fair pay—they were on strike just last Saturday.

Where, now, is the Scottish Government, which owns ScotRail and is the sole shareholder in ScotRail Trains Ltd? The Scottish Government called for urgent Government action in the UK rail disputes. What about urgent Government action in the current ScotRail dispute? Is it not time that the Scottish Government got that situation fixed, and fast, showed more urgency, recognised its own serious dereliction of duty—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Leonard, is that the question finished?

Richard Leonard: —and stepped up to settle this dispute?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please respond, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: Where the Scottish Government is assisting in trying to get us to a resolution with the unions and ScotRail. That is really important.

I spent some time meeting the railway unions only three weeks ago and, last week, I met ScotRail to talk about its approach to engaging and working with our trade union partners. I again put on record the difference between the approach of the Scottish Government, which is working with our trade union partners, and that adopted by the UK Government, which is bringing forward anti-trade union legislation. Only two weeks ago, it came forward with additional anti-trade union legislation in an attempt to ban legitimate trade union action, which is quite despicable, as I hope the member would agree.

Back in June, the RMT's Mick Hogg was quoted as saying that he wanted to work with the Scottish Government, and that perhaps the UK Government should take a leaf out of the Scottish Government's approach to union engagement.

It is important to recount that the pay offer that was put to the RMT represents a 5 per cent increase in basic pay, plus an excess revenue share premium that is worth up to £195 every four weeks if targets are exceeded. I accept that the RMT took a decision not to put that to its membership in Scotland. That is in its gift. Last week, on top of the 5 per cent that had already been offered, ScotRail proposed consolidating a technology payment into basic pay. That was worth up to £500 per member for all general grades of staff and would have been 7.4 per cent for a gateline member of staff, or 6.5 per cent for a conductor.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I must ask you to bring your answer to a close by summarising some of your points.

Jenny Gilruth: It is untrue and unfair to characterise the Scottish Government's involvement in the process as lacking urgency. We have consistently engaged with trade union partners. I have undertaken much of that work myself and ScotRail continues meeting regularly with trade unions. However, it is worth saying that the wider UK dispute is no doubt playing into what we are seeing in Scotland at the moment.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): ScotRail has made what I would describe as a fair and affordable offer to RMT staff. Is it not time for the union barons of the RMT to put that offer to their members and to stop holding the country to ransom?

Jenny Gilruth: I will not associate myself with Mr Simpson's language, but I do think that it

should be for RMT members in Scotland to have a democratic say on the offer that was put on the table.

European Hydrogen Week

5. **Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the outcomes of its attendance at the European hydrogen week in Brussels. (S6O-01496)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I visited Brussels last week at the start of European hydrogen week and engaged with a range of stakeholders, including the European Parliament and key hydrogen partners. That was an opportunity to showcase Scotland as a potential exporter of green hydrogen to the European Union and to highlight our extensive renewables capacity, skills base and energy experience. I also hosted a high-level round table at Scotland House in Brussels, where we discussed the importance of North Sea collaboration.

Outcomes from that visit will support the delivery of our hydrogen ambitions, particularly the realisation of Scotland's export potential, as set out in our hydrogen action plan.

Fiona Hyslop: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

For a number of years, I have heard, and have relayed to the Scottish Government, German interest in green hydrogen exports from Scotland. That was again emphasised to me in meetings held in Germany as part of an MSP visit during the summer.

How is the cabinet secretary ensuring that Scotland does not act merely as a supplier of renewable energy exported by international companies that are internationally owned? Can the Scottish Government assure me that it will be proactive in securing jobs, supply chains, value and benefit—which could include equity stakes and ownership—from renewable energy technologies and industry for people and communities here in Scotland?

Michael Matheson: There is huge potential for Scotland to maximise the hydrogen economy here, not only for our own domestic purposes but for export. That is why, in September, I published the hydrogen proposition, which helps to set out the scope of investment opportunities here in Scotland and the process that companies considering investing in Scotland can choose to use.

A supply chain event in September allowed us to bring together stakeholders and companies from across the country and abroad. There are

more than 50 hydrogen projects in Scotland. If they all realised their ambitions, they would collectively deliver in excess of 5GW of hydrogen by 2030.

The key to that is to ensure that we are not simply a production base for hydrogen but that we are a manufacturing base for the capabilities that sit alongside that. That is why Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International have been undertaking a piece of work on electrolyser manufacturing with Scotland-based businesses and have been looking at the opportunity to attract inward investment to electrolyser manufacturing here in Scotland. I hope that we will be able to capitalise on that in the months and years ahead to ensure not only that we produce hydrogen but that we manufacture the component parts that go into that production process, particularly electrolysers.

Bus Drivers (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale)

6. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it can do to address any bus driver shortages across Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale. (S6O-01497)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I know that the shortage of bus drivers, which is more prevalent in some areas than others, is creating challenges for local communities. Short-notice cancellations affect people who have no other way to travel. I am acutely aware of how that disproportionately impacts lower-income workers—in particular, those who work unsociable hours—who are proportionately more reliant on bus travel than others are.

I have convened the bus task force to address the issues affecting the industry, which include establishing a sub-group that focuses on driver shortages. On Tuesday, I met the unions that represent the bus workforce to hear their concerns and ideas for addressing the shortages.

Christine Grahame: Whether I am speaking to representatives of Lothian Buses, the main company that serves Midlothian in my constituency, or Borders Buses, which serves the Borders, the answer to the driver shortage question is the same: Brexit. Apart from such meetings, what else can be done, under devolved Government, to remedy the impact that such shortages are having on delivery of bus services in my rural constituency?

Jenny Gilruth: Christine Grahame is absolutely right. There is increasingly clear evidence of just how harmful Brexit has been and will be for Scotland's economy and communities. The current shortage of bus drivers has been exacerbated by

Brexit, which has prevented people from the European Union from coming here to work freely. I discussed the issue with representatives of Lothian Buses when I visited one of its depots in Edinburgh earlier in the week.

We have repeatedly sought a formal role in determining which occupations are in shortage in the devolved nations, but unfortunately the United Kingdom Government has denied us that thus far. Bus drivers are not included in the shortage occupation list. I will shortly write to the UK Government to raise the issue again. We need the Conservatives at Westminster either to act or to hand over powers on that aspect to the Scottish Parliament to enable us to find our own solutions to the problem.

Also in the reserved competences space, fuel prices are becoming increasingly challenging for our operators. To that end, I have invited my UK counterpart to join the bus task force. She was unable to join its inaugural meeting, but I very much hope that she will be able to join the next one, which will be in December.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The shortage of drivers is hitting services in the Borders, as can be seen from the frequency of the X95 service, but so too is funding. The minister will know that the 101/102 service between Dumfries and Edinburgh through Midlothian and the Borders is under threat because the tender for that service came in 90 per cent higher than the previous contract, for the very reasons, such as fuel prices, that she has mentioned. Does she think that more or fewer services will be under threat as a result of her decision to withdraw the network support grant plus from bus companies?

Jenny Gilruth: I presume that the member is referring to the network support plus grant. Is that accurate?

Colin Smyth: Yes.

Jenny Gilruth: The member will know that that funding came to an end this month. However, in an update that I provided to Parliament during a previous session of question time, I confirmed that I was urgently seeking assurances from my officials on what more we might be able to do to support the bus industry. I very much recognise the challenges that it faces at the moment, in particular in relation to fares and driver shortages, which we have touched on.

We are already investing in the bus network. The resource spending review has provided more than £2.1 billion for bus transport over the rest of this parliamentary session, so significant funding is there. However, I recognise the challenge, which is why I remind the member that, as I said in Parliament only a matter of weeks ago, my

officials are urgently looking at options in this space.

The member needs to recognise the financial challenge that has been presented to the Government, and not as a result of its own actions. We will work within the competences of the Scottish Parliament to see what more the Scottish Government might be able to deliver. I hope to be able to update Parliament further in the coming days to that end.

Air Quality

7. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve air quality on Scotland's most polluted streets. (S6O-01498)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): Compared with the rest of the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe, Scotland enjoys a high level of air quality. Air quality objectives are being met across the vast majority of Scotland, and levels of the main air pollutants have declined significantly over the past three decades. The introduction of low-emission zones in our four largest cities is a key initiative in further improving urban air quality. Modelling predicts that there will be a significant reduction in harmful vehicle emissions on some of the most polluted streets within the low-emission zones when enforcement starts, which I welcome.

Martin Whitfield: With landslides alongside the A77 being dealt with by long-term temporary traffic lights, which keep vehicles stationary for long periods of time, every stationary car, lorry, motorbike, camper van and other vehicle is releasing high quantities of pollution into the atmosphere there. What plans has the Scottish Government to reduce the pollution occasioned by that stationary traffic to help to meet our net zero targets, as well as for road safety reasons?

Màiri McAllan: The Minister for Transport has just informed me that she met the action task force on this very issue yesterday. If the member is content for me to do so, I will confer with my colleague after the meeting and will update him in writing.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): We know that air pollution in Scotland is often worse in deprived inner-city areas, which worsens existing inequalities, local environmental quality and human health. What impact is it anticipated that the low-emission zones will have on improving air quality in those highly affected areas?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly please, minister.

Màiri McAllan: There is no doubt that air pollution has a negative impact on health, and the

introduction of the LEZs in our four largest cities is, as I said, a key initiative in improving the situation. Air quality assessments were undertaken by the local authorities in preparation for the introduction of LEZs. The assessments predict that the LEZs will deliver a significant reduction in emissions of harmful air pollution in those four cities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if I get brief questions and, from the minister, brief and succinct answers.

I call Jenni Minto.

Peatland Restoration

8. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer—I will try to be brief, or I will speak quickly.

To ask the Scottish Government how peatland restoration will be measured as a component of the proposed land management plans in the forthcoming land reform bill. (S6O-01499)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): The forthcoming land reform bill is in its early days; we have just closed the consultation. That consultation included a range of proposals, including on land management plans, which will help to ensure that large-scale land holdings contribute to Scotland's net zero and nature restoration goals.

Existing schemes to support peatland restoration have monitoring and reporting requirements, and landowners who are seeking financial support can apply to NatureScot's peatland action fund, which sets out clearly how the project's outcomes are measured.

Jenni Minto: Peatland restoration is fundamentally about restoring the habitat to its best possible condition. That can be tied into land rights and responsibilities where the Scottish Government wants to restore a community's relationship with the land, while also ensuring that the community has certainty about its social and economic future.

What plans does the Scottish Government have to ensure that communities that get their land get full support and technical assistance to undertake peatland restoration?

Màiri McAllan: The connection between people and land is important to me, as I know that it is to the member. The Scottish Government funds NatureScot to deliver the peatland action programme across Scotland. The programme welcomes approaches from all landowners and land managers who are interested in undertaking peatland restoration on their land, whether it is private, public or community-owned land. Through its website and network of project officers, the peatland action programme offers a range of both

general and bespoke guidance and advice on the peatland restoration processes, from design to delivery.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. During the preceding series of questions, there was not a single Conservative question officially down to be asked. Apart from the last question, I was the only member who was not allowed to ask a supplementary to a question.

I understand that some of the questions and answers were long, but after I tried to ask a supplementary, other members got supplementaries to other questions. I would like an explanation, please.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First, I think that the member is aware that questions are randomly drawn—and not by me; they are not a matter for the chair. Secondly, the management of a question time is up to the Presiding Officer in the chair, and a number of factors are taken into account.

I assure the member that of the supplementaries that were taken, three were taken from Scottish National Party members, two from the Conservative party, one from Labour and one from the Green party. I think that one can see that that is a fair allocation. As I said, it is a matter for the Presiding Officer in the chair, and I would hope that the member would accept the authority of the chair.

Social Security Benefits

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-06572, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on progress on the automation and take-up of Scottish social security benefits. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:09

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): Today's debate is—regrettably—timely, because, as we head into winter, the unfair and unnecessary reality of 21st century Britain is that, for far too many people, the cost of living crisis that we are in is deeply worrying and will be damaging in a multitude of ways.

Too many of the constituents whom we serve are facing difficult financial decisions that they should not have to make, and they are facing costs and bills that should not be so high. That should not be happening in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, at a time when there are more billionaires in the United Kingdom than ever before. The situation is wrong.

That is why the Scottish Government is taking action, including investing £1 billion to support families and households with financial help that is not available elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Of course, that includes the Scottish child payment, which will shortly increase to £25 a week and be extended to under-16s. I note also that, yesterday, the Deputy First Minister confirmed that we will double the December bridging payment for families to £260 and increase our fuel insecurity fund to £20 million.

I acknowledge the action that the UK Government has taken so far. It is welcome, but we need that Government to use the vast amount of levers that it has to do more in this emergency and to tackle the scale of the challenge in a way that is required, including by increasing benefits in line with inflation and increasing universal credit by £25, a move that should also be extended to means-tested legacy benefits.

In the context of the cost of living crisis—this unjust context—that has undoubtedly been influenced by Covid and international affairs, but has also undoubtedly been exacerbated by 10 years of ideological austerity, the calamity of Brexit and reckless recent UK Government economic policy decisions, having a reliable and responsive social security safety net has never been more pertinent, and how we use the limited powers and resources of this devolved Parliament where we can, ambitiously but also realistically, to make a

meaningful difference, has never been more important.

The Scottish Government is clear that social security is an investment in the people of Scotland—indeed, that is the first of the eight principles in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. It is a shared investment in building a fairer society together. From promoting devolved Scottish benefits to delivering more accessible application processes, and from providing advice and advocacy to taking a more person-centred approach and starting from a position of trust, we are committed to doing what we can to ensure that people are aware of what they are entitled to and feel empowered to seek what they are due. That is why we are working day in, day out to remove barriers, provide support, tackle any stigma around applying for benefits and get more money out to help low-income households than is being made available anywhere else in the UK.

Remarkable teams are doing that work out of Social Security Scotland's offices in Dundee and Glasgow. We are also working in communities, directly with people who use the social security system, as we have successfully implemented Social Security Scotland's local delivery network, with more than 400 excellent staff now operational in all 32 local authority areas.

In the four years since the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was passed, the Scottish Government, with highly motivated and extremely capable civil servants, has delivered 12 benefits, seven of which are completely new forms of financial support that are available only in Scotland, and our 13th—the winter heating payment—will be introduced in February.

We are delivering a simplified, easily accessible and compassionate system that treats everyone with dignity, fairness and respect—one in which 92 per cent of respondents to a client survey rated their overall experience as very good or good.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the approach to social security in Scotland that the minister has outlined, but how does he explain the high rates of redeterminations that overturn decisions, particularly in relation to child disability payment?

Ben Macpherson: I am not sure what empirical evidence Pam Duncan-Glancy is citing, but I am happy to engage with her on that point. Of course, there is a determination, with child disability payment and adult disability payment, to get our decisions right first time. I am happy to have further engagement on that point, but I would say that the situation that she has outlined is not reflective of the situation as I see it. However, we can engage further on that point in a constructive way.

I will deal with the amendments. On the Conservative amendment, I have already acknowledged the support of the UK Government, but I have pushed and encouraged it to do more. Unfortunately, I cannot accept the amendment, because it contains a factual inaccuracy. It states that the Scottish welfare fund review has been delayed, but it has not been, and I will update the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on that shortly. I cannot accept the amendment because of that.

Unfortunately, I cannot accept the Labour amendment either, because it would delete huge portions of the motion, and all that I can see in it is wishful thinking. It seems to state that things could be done quicker and things could have been delivered quicker in past years. I say in good faith that, since the 2018 act was passed, the Government has worked with innovation, determination and passion to deliver Scottish devolved social security benefits as quickly as possible and as safely and securely as possible. We will continue to do that.

The motion is not party political in the sense that it does not criticise and does not mention the constitution. Therefore, I hope that, if both amendments are defeated, all parties can support the motion, and we can take a united approach.

The Government is working proactively and with determination to support people who are eligible for assistance and to help them to access and take up the benefits to which they are entitled. For example, information about Scottish social security benefits is featured as part of our new cost of living campaign. The campaign directs people to our new one-stop-shop website, which was launched in September. Moreover, since October 2021, Social Security Scotland has delivered 12 paid-for marketing campaigns covering a range of online and offline channels, including television, radio, print, digital and out-of-home advertising.

We will, of course, continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that information about each of the Scottish benefits is available in places that our target audiences are already accessing, so that it is as accessible as possible. For example, 43,000 leaflets that cover the five family payments and, more recently, the child disability payment are included in the Scottish Government's baby boxes and in national health service midwife and health visitor packs. We provide materials to Department for Work and Pensions work coaches in jobcentres to encourage young people to apply for the job start payment, and we have partnered with the supermarket retailer Asda and worked with Iceland, Scotmid and the Co-op to ensure that information about our benefits reaches people where they are. Information about our benefits is

included in refugee welcome packs, and fact sheets are proactively translated into community languages, such as Ukrainian in particular this year.

In January, we launched our free and independent social security advocacy service to support disabled people to access and apply for Scottish social security benefits. We have also continued to invest in providing advice in accessible settings to maximise incomes and tackle poverty.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): For clarification, I am unsure—maybe it is my ignorance—where those advisers sit in my region. Would it be possible for at least MSPs and maybe local councillors to be given that information? I am certainly not aware of where that happens in Lothian.

Ben Macpherson: Social Security Scotland has been proactive with MPs and MSPs in reaching out to raise awareness of the available services. Indeed, Pam Duncan-Glancy met her local delivery team just recently. I can certainly take that point away following the debate and write to members again about sources of information so that all of us can play a role in spreading the word. That is being done in general practitioner practices, and it is happening across Scotland, as I have set out.

All of that is helping with take-up rates and is being done to drive the take-up of benefits. Our latest estimates of the take-up of benefits were published on Monday in what is a very helpful publication. They are estimates and analysis is difficult, but they will help to give us a benchmark in order to continue to track where we are.

On the whole, our most recent estimated take-up rates are reassuring. They show really encouraging figures for our Scottish child payment and best start suite of payments in particular. We are not quite where we want to be with the funeral support payment and the job start payment, but we are working proactively to make a difference in that regard.

Automation is one of the key tools available to us in driving up benefit take-up. We are working proactively to remove barriers to access in relation to the automation of processes and payments across the social security system. We have already automated the payment of the carers allowance supplement and child winter heating assistance. If Parliament agrees next week, we will also pay the best start early learning and the best start school-age payments automatically to eligible individuals who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment, from 28 November. There is more to do in that area, and I am sure that we

will discuss it today, but we are already making good progress.

It would be inappropriate for me to outline the important ways in which we seek to maximise the take-up of Scottish benefits without referring to resourcing and the financial uncertainty that we are experiencing. Social security expenditure is needs based and demand led; as such, it is determined by the number of people who are in receipt of benefits.

It is important to acknowledge that, after benefit take-up work has been carried out, any shortfall between actual expenditure and the social security block grant adjustment will need to be covered by funding that is provided by the Scottish Government, in line with the principles and policies set out in the mid-term financial strategy. However, we are absolutely committed to that spend and resolute in our conviction that it is important, as it is an investment in the people of Scotland. It is about putting our principles into practice.

We have a finite budget—one that is already worth £1.7 billion less than it was in December last year due to inflationary pressures and UK Government actions—but every decision that we make in social security that needs additional investment must come from that fixed budget, as the constraints of devolution mean that we cannot borrow to meet increased costs. However, we are absolutely committed to promoting and encouraging people to access the benefits and support that they are entitled to, because that is the right thing to do.

The collective challenge that our constituents face underlines the need for us to work together to support and empower people to access the assistance that they are entitled to—both Scottish support and UK Government support, such as universal credit and pension credit. I emphasise that we all need to encourage people to access Social Security Scotland and to assure them that, when they do so, they will always be treated with dignity, fairness and respect.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the positive impact that existing automation of Scottish social security payments is having, including ensuring that most eligible people receive the Child Winter Heating Assistance and Carer's Allowance Supplement without needing to apply; further welcomes the proposal to automate the Best Start Grant Early Learning Payment and Best Start Grant School Age Payment for eligible families in receipt of Scottish Child Payment by the end of November 2022; notes the Scottish Government's intention to continue exploring opportunities for further automation; believes that these changes will mean that more people get the benefits that they are entitled to, which is especially important at a time of increasing economic uncertainty; recognises the progress made in promoting Scottish benefit take-up since the publication of the second benefit take-up strategy in 2021, including the launch of an

independent advocacy service and funding welfare rights advisors in up to 180 GP practices in Scotland's most deprived areas, as well as remote and rural areas; acknowledges that there is still work to do regarding both automation and take-up, and agrees, therefore, that all governments should ensure that people are aware of, and enabled to access, the financial support that they are eligible for and entitled to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. Before I call the next speaker, I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate to ensure that their request-to-speak buttons are, in fact, pressed. Thank you.

I call Jeremy Balfour.

15:22

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am happy to speak in the debate and hope that the Conservative amendment, in my name, can unite members in the chamber in recognising the work that both the Scottish and the UK Governments are doing to help people during the cost of living crisis, because what this country needs, at this moment in history, is both our Governments working together to alleviate the stress that is being placed on families.

The benefit of devolution is that we can provide, alongside national measures that are enacted UK-wide, targeted local support here in Scotland. Our amendment reflects that and acknowledges that there is a positive working relationship between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government, so I give credit to the minister for engaging constructively with the DWP to ensure that claimants in Scotland have been through minimal disruption during the transfer to Social Security Scotland.

However, I am afraid that that is where credit for this Scottish Government runs dry, because the transfer of benefits to the devolved agency has been far from smooth. "Late and over budget" does not even begin to describe the extent to which the Scottish National Party has struggled to take control of benefits in Scotland.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Jeremy Balfour: I will, in a second.

The handover will not be complete until at least 2025, which means that a project that was projected to take four years will take almost a decade. The administration cost for Social Security Scotland has quadrupled from £36 million in 2019-20 to a staggering £130 million in 2021-22.

I am happy to take the intervention now.

Ben Macpherson: I thank Jeremy Balfour for taking the intervention. Does he recognise that the

increases in costs have been because we are delivering more than was envisaged when we passed the 2018 act, in that we are delivering seven benefits that are not available elsewhere in the UK?

Does the member acknowledge that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government made a collective decision to pause delivery of some of our benefits because of the need for reprioritisation during the pandemic?

This is a joint exercise between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, so any criticism about delay should be targeted at both Governments, if it is to have any validity.

Jeremy Balfour: The minister is missing the point. The process would have been delayed even without Covid: the delays were already happening before the pandemic hit, which was all to do with the Scottish Government and nothing to do with the DWP.

Add to that the fact that the Scottish Government's soft approach to assessment has cost Social Security Scotland over £64 million in fraud and error over the past year alone, and we find ourselves staring at a complete mess. I am thankful that the broad shoulders of the UK Government have been able to pick up the slack that has been left by the Scottish National Party's mismanagement. Thanks to the DWP's steady hands, claimants have experienced minimal disruption and money continues to get into the hands of those who need it.

At this point, it is worth noting that if the Scottish Government has its way and breaks up the UK, the people of Scotland will lose that vital support. The Scottish Government would be on its own to muddle through with the difficulties of setting up a social security system for an entire nation, when it has not even been able to manage a few benefits.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I am afraid that my time is running short.

The truth is that, as much as the SNP Government might like to deflect from its own record by complaining about big bad Westminster, the DWP is taking action to ensure that the people of Scotland are supported through this difficult period.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I am afraid that I do not have time.

The DWP is providing the £650 cost of living payment for every household that is on means-

tested benefits, which means that more than 8 million of the most vulnerable UK—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes—you can get a wee bit of time back.

Bob Doris: I thank Jeremy Balfour for giving way.

He keeps talking about the

“broad shoulders of the UK”.

Does the member believe that the broad shoulders of the UK should uprate all benefits in line with inflation so that people who are living in poverty are not suffering at the hands of those broad shoulders of the UK?

Jeremy Balfour: Yes, I believe that.

Let me continue. More than 8 million of the most vulnerable UK households will be directly sent a one-off cash payment of £650. The DWP has increased the winter fuel payment to £300, in addition to sending all existing recipients an additional one-off £300 cash payment, which will help families to heat their homes this winter without a delay by the Scottish Government of another year. There will be an extra £150 disability cost of living payment for those who are in receipt of disability benefits, to provide support for the most vulnerable people in our society. For people who are on other disability benefits, such as the disability living allowance and the personal independence payment, the £150 boost will provide much-needed supplementary funds. That is all in addition to the £400 cash grant that will be paid to every household, to help with energy costs over the next six months.

That is in contrast to the SNP Government’s soaring rhetoric; what the Government does never seems to live up to the hype. We get huge promises that are designed to grab headlines and fuel conference speeches, but almost immediately those promises fail.

For that reason, Conservative members are sceptical about the Government’s ability to deliver on its plans. I would, rather than hearing about something that will happen in the future, be interested to hear from the minister how many welfare rights advisers have been placed across Scotland, and how many general practices have someone in place today. I am happy to give way, if the minister would like to tell me the answer.

Ben Macpherson: I thank Jeremy Balfour. I had to cut from my speech a paragraph about that because of time. The investment that we are making takes our total commitment to £3.5 million

over three years, and places welfare rights advisers in up to 180 GP practices in Scotland’s most deprived areas.

Jeremy Balfour: Once again, the minister has failed to answer the question. How many welfare rights advisers are in place today—not in the future, but today? Yet again, there has been another delay and there is another failure.

If the Scottish Government’s report into the Scottish welfare fund is not going to be delayed, I would be genuinely interested to hear the minister guarantee that we will see the report on the due date. Perhaps he could cover that in his closing remarks, rather than saying that he will write to the committee.

Conservative members support both of Scotland’s Governments in their efforts to ensure that support makes it, as quickly and seamlessly as possible, to the people who need it. However, promises must be matched by action. People do not need kind words about future plans—they need real action right now.

I move amendment S6M-06572.1, to insert at end:

“; is encouraged by the joint work of the UK and Scottish governments to help all people in Scotland; welcomes the work done by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to ensure that people are getting their benefits; welcomes the extra funds provided by the UK Government in Barnett consequentials to support struggling families, and expresses disappointment in the delay of the Scottish Welfare Fund review, and in the lack of collection of data by Social Security Scotland.”

15:30

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In the midst of the current cost of living crisis, people are struggling more than ever, so we need a social security system that meets that challenge. It is crucial that it be fit for purpose and able to catch people when they need help. Social security exists to provide such a safety net, but safety nets are no use if there are holes in them.

No one in Scotland who is entitled to a benefit should not yet be receiving it. Sadly, however, too many people are in that position. Nearly 30 per cent of young carers do not get the grant that they are entitled to and over 30 per cent of people who are eligible for them do not get funeral support payments. There are other examples that I could highlight. Obviously the easiest way of sorting out that situation is to automate payments, so I welcome moves from the Government to do so.

However, I am again frustrated by the pace of and ambition for change in that respect. We should really be striving for a system that is smart enough to identify incomes, that recognises when people become eligible for benefits and which then

pays out. Instead, what we have is piecemeal, standard and disconnected. We really need to address that situation, because automation will not just ensure that people do not miss out on the money to which they are entitled, but will remove the burden of having to hunt down support in times of crisis.

Part of the problem, however, is that right now we do not have a system that is fully administered in Scotland, never mind one that is fully automated. There is still no timetable for the development and delivery of many devolved benefits, including the replacement for attendance allowance, carers additional person payment, severe disablement allowance and employment injury assistance. We still await the Government's plans for a replacement carers allowance; in the meantime, thousands of carers are falling through the net and are not receiving anything for the care that they give.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I appreciate the point about pace. Pam Duncan-Glancy will know that I share her desire to get money into people's hands as soon as possible, but she must appreciate that it would be easier for our system to take incomes into consideration if income-based benefits were devolved. Does the member support full devolution of the social security system in order to ensure that we do not have to keep asking the DWP for data?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: As Emma Roddick will know, I have said time and again that I think that this is about planning and proper co-operation between the Governments so that we can get the data that we need and can deliver the benefits that we have to deliver.

Disabled people, carers, older people and women have been left in a DWP-administered system that is widely recognised as being unfit for purpose. Now, more than ever, as people are struggling to heat their homes and put food on the table, they need the Government to take responsibility for the powers that it holds, and to stop leaving them in Tory hands. The simple fact is that it is not doing that.

The system is failing to meet people's needs and I worry that, in its current form, it will never be able to deliver the sort of vision that Scottish Labour has, in which inequality is a thing of the past and everyone has enough money to live on, can enjoy the right to work and has access to a social security system that is adequate, automated, based on human rights and there when it is needed. The reality is that we are nowhere near achieving that vision—in fact, I do not even think that we are on the path to it.

I acknowledge that some work has been impacted by the pandemic, but that does not explain all the delays or excuse the fact that the Government has failed to make any progress at all on so many benefits over which it has power. Instead, it has handed powers back to the DWP and is spending huge swathes of cash doing so. Half the benefits that we should have control over are still administered elsewhere. That is disappointing.

For example, with the adult disability payment, the SNP could have made real changes by removing the 20m and 50 per cent rules, in recognition that those numbers are arbitrary and do not acknowledge fluctuating conditions. The Government has said that it must prioritise safe and secure transfer first of all, but it also promised disabled people radical change seven years ago—and those people are getting tired of waiting.

I am frustrated that it has taken years for all eligible kids to get the Scottish child payment and that uptake is still not what it should be. I am also frustrated that the SNP would not, when it was challenged on that, accept responsibility for not planning for it, but said instead that the UK Government did not give it the data. The then secretary of state confirmed in committee that the Government had not asked for it. I could criticise the DWP in countless ways—if I had more time, I would—but it cannot be blamed for not giving the Scottish Government data that it did not ask for.

In the same vein, I understand that DWP data sharing is also one of the barriers to automating local authority administered benefits. As things stand, local authorities have access to real-time income data from the DWP in order to assess eligibility for council tax reduction. However, that data is shared under the explicit agreement that it must be used only for that purpose, which means that it cannot be used to reach out to people who should be eligible for best start grants, school uniform grants or free school meals. Of course, one way around that would be to level eligibility.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Does Pam Duncan-Glancy welcome the fact that, by the end of this month, eligible families who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment will receive the best start grant and early learning and school age payments, without the need to apply?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: As I said earlier, about 30 per cent of those young people do not currently get the payments, so I do welcome that change.

We really need both Governments to start working together and delivering for the people of Scotland, instead of pointing fingers or—in the case of the Tories—sitting on their hands. We cannot overstate the opportunity that we had to create a whole new system from the bottom up. It

was a key moment, but it feels in some respects increasingly as though the SNP failed to grasp it.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can I get my time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, you can.

Ben Macpherson: I wonder whether, despite her—I believe—unfounded criticisms about timelines, Ms Duncan-Glancy will acknowledge that the only reason why we have powers over social security in this Parliament is the SNP, and that her party, along with other colleagues, in years past opposed there being more powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: In that statement, the minister is somewhat rewriting history.

Although I recognise areas that have improved, the situation in some places has regressed. There is little that is good about the DWP, but some of the things that it gets right seem to be areas in which the Scottish Government has decided to diverge. For example, Social Security Scotland, unlike the DWP, refused to accept signed mandates via email, which I discovered because it has created barriers for one of my constituents.

Last week, it was confirmed to my committee that there are currently no referral pathways in place at Social Security Scotland to allow direct referrals from agencies such as schools or GPs. That is a huge missed opportunity and a problem that the Government must urgently seek to address.

Low uptake could easily be addressed by automation, but it could also be addressed by proper referral mechanisms. Focusing on fancy comms and social media puts the burden on people to apply, is expensive and is not leading to enough uptake. Instead, the Government should invest in people, intensive referral mechanisms and smart information technology that can automate payments, identify minimum standards and recognise when people fall below them.

If we look at the figures on redetermination requests, it is clear that Social Security Scotland is not getting the decision making right. For some benefits, well over half of the redetermination requests are approved, which means that the system has forced people to get over additional hurdles, when they should have been awarded payments in the first place. That is not the system that we were promised and, with redetermination rates like that, it is not the system that the SNP has told us it is delivering.

There is still time to fix that, and opportunities still lie ahead in the benefits that the SNP has not

yet started to work on. However, things need to change, and they need to do so quickly. For that to happen, the Government must be laser focused on delivering the social security system that it promised.

I move amendment S6M-06572.2, to leave out from “welcomes the positive” to end and insert:

“notes the impact that existing automation of Scottish social security payments is having, including ensuring that most eligible people receive the Child Winter Heating Assistance and Carer’s Allowance Supplement without needing to apply; believes that the opportunity to automate other aspects of the social security system should have been taken before now; regrets that the Best Start Grant Early Learning Payment and the Best Start Grant School Age Payment for eligible families in receipt of Scottish Child Payment are not yet automated; notes that uptake for Scottish social security payments is not yet maximised and that the Scottish Government has chosen to allow the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) to continue to administer several devolved benefits; believes that opportunities for further automation must be expedited so that more people get the benefits that they are entitled to, which is especially important at a time of increasing economic uncertainty; understands that direct referral mechanisms between public agencies and other organisations in Scotland have not been developed, and urges the Scottish Government to prioritise this to ensure that the “no wrong door approach” can be delivered fully, and that those who are entitled to social security payments are enabled to access the financial support that they are eligible for.”

Jeremy Balfour: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. At the start of my speech, I should have referred members to my entry in the register of members’ interests. I am in receipt of PIP and I hope to receive adult disability payment at some point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour. That is now on the record.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am also in receipt of PIP. I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Duncan-Glancy. That is also now on the record.

15:38

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats have tried to work constructively with the Scottish Government on its welfare responsibilities and we will continue to do so. Where improvement is needed, we will remain constructively critical. In April, my colleague Willie Rennie highlighted the Scottish Government’s decision to continue disability benefits under DWP administration, which left recipients of the adult disability payment enhanced daily living component worse off by £135.20 per year than they would have been. Being too slow off the mark to use the full extent of the powers that the

Scottish Government has under devolution is a failure for benefit recipients across Scotland.

Scottish Liberal Democrats support a welfare system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect, and I echo the sentiment that there should not be any stigma around accessing benefits for the people who are entitled to them.

Simplifying and automating benefits payments is welcome, as it helps to break down the stigma that unhelpfully surrounds benefit uptake by those who are entitled. However, extending automation to the best start grant early learning and school age payments could have been done sooner. The motion expressly states that the best start grant early learning and school age payments will be automated

“by the end of November 2022”,

which is this month. I am sure that that will be welcomed by families across Scotland, as I welcome it, but they could have benefited sooner.

The cost of living crisis will be getting tougher as we enter the winter and our usual cold weather, along with eye-watering energy bills. The UK Government is warming us up to tighter budgets from tax rises and public spending cuts. Every penny in household budgets really will be stretched and relied on heavily this winter.

I welcome the launch of an independent advocacy service and welfare rights advisers, who will be placed in up to 180 GP surgeries in Scotland’s most deprived areas and in rural areas. There should be an effective publicity campaign to ensure that people are aware of that service. I was going to ask the minister to provide information on the plans to publicise the service, but I note what he said earlier. Leaflets are fine, but will there be a national advertising campaign and what form might it take?

The service and the welfare rights advisers will be valuable resources for communities across the country. Too often, there is simply not enough known about what is available for people who are on restricted budgets. Online information can be interpreted differently, which can convince people that they cannot apply for a benefit when, actually, the opposite is true, and they are eligible.

Our rural areas are often home to some of the most deprived communities, so any innovation to break that should be commended for its intent. However, I put on record my concerns that the resource could be slowly eroded by public service cuts, putting the enormous burden back on to our fantastic and valuable citizens advice bureaux across the country. Citizens advice services make representations on behalf of people across Scotland, helping them with benefits queries, housing issues, energy costs and much more.

Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister outlined adjustments to the Scottish Government’s budget. We will now see slower growth in the mental health budget provision, which will impact some of the most vulnerable in our society.

There will always be more work to do to improve the take-up of entitlements. Work will need to continue to ensure that estimates of the number of people who are eligible are as accurate as possible and that accurate uptake figures are generated. Those figures and the reasons behind them will need to be continually updated and analysed to ensure that all those who are eligible for a benefit are receiving their full entitlement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have pretty much exhausted any time that we had in hand, so any interventions will need to be accommodated in your speaking time allowance.

15:43

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): The motion that we are debating today is truly a positive one, and I continue to be proud of the social security system that we are building here in Scotland. We have built a system that is kind, fairer and more progressive than anything that we have seen before. It is a system that does not treat social security as a burden on the state but actively encourages people to take exactly what they are entitled to.

I whole-heartedly believe that social security is a significant investment in the people of Scotland. Let us imagine for a minute that the benefit powers that have been devolved were still under the DWP system. There would be no Scottish child payment, for a start, and many families, children and people with disabilities all across Scotland would still be stuck under the degrading, stale and discriminatory DWP system.

I am disappointed with the amendments that we have in front of us today. Although there is always more to do and scrutiny is essential, it would be easy to sit on the Opposition benches and cast negativity and doubt on every positive move that this Government makes to improve people’s lives.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is interesting that you start off by saying that you wish people were not in the DWP system, which is so uncompassionate, but you cannot understand why members on this side of the chamber want to push the Government to do as much as it can to get the systems in place as quickly as possible. Will you acknowledge that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, Ms Mochan.

Natalie Don: I never said that I cannot understand why you are pushing us to do more; I said that there is always more to do. I just find that the negativity that comes from the Opposition benches often overlooks the positive steps that the Government is making.

I move on to an important point that is in line with the Scottish Fiscal Commission's forecast. The Scottish Government is committing £4.2 billion to benefits expenditure this year, and the forecast rises to £6.5 billion in 2026-27. To put that into perspective, it is more than £460 million above the level of funding that is forecast to be received from the United Kingdom Government in 2022-23, and it is anticipated that that difference will increase to £1.3 billion by 2026-27—still a massive shortfall.

Those figures show the divergence between the Scottish and the UK Governments. We are investing in our people; meanwhile, the Tories are doing everything that they can to put people off benefits. Rishi Sunak is burying his head in the sand when it comes to raising benefits in line with inflation—

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): At the Social Security and Social Justice Committee, we have heard again and again that in Scotland the SNP-Green Government is currently looking at there being a £760 million black hole in future welfare policy payments by the end of this session of Parliament. Where will that money come from, and why do you think that the Deputy First Minister did not touch on that in the two statements that he has made to Parliament?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, speak through the chair.

Natalie Don: The figures that I was relating go up to 2026-27. I believe that we will be a flourishing, independent country by that point, so I think that we will have much more freedom in where we allocate our resources.

Miles Briggs: Will the member take another intervention?

Natalie Don: No, I am not going to take any more interventions. I would like to make progress—thank you.

They are scraping up every penny they can from those who actually need it. It is shocking that a Conservative would even stand in this Parliament and defend the crooks who are running things down in Westminster.

Automation is an incredibly positive thing. Filling out form after form after form is trying, degrading and demoralising, so a system that works to simplify that is only going to help people. I think that that is one of the key points that sets this Government apart from the catastrophic DWP

system. We recognise that there is still work to do to deliver the automation that we want to see, and that is why we are investing more than £20 million over the next four years in the social security independent advocacy service. That will ensure that people who are looking to claim what they are entitled to are given the support that they require in order to do so.

Encouraging take-up and making it easier for people to get what they are entitled to work toward reducing the stigma that exists around benefits. Stigma has been identified as one of the key barriers to the take-up of benefits, and the only way to reduce that in the system is to design it with input from the people who use it. Stigma exists within the system—

Jeremy Balfour: Will the member take an intervention?

Natalie Don: No. Sorry, I need to make progress. Stigma exists within the system because it is being bred through it. I remember attending the jobcentre and making my claim for what at the time was jobseekers allowance, and, honestly, feeling like a piece of dirt that someone had just scraped off their shoe. As a young teenager who left home under difficult circumstances, I needed support, not judgment, and it was not there.

That is why I am so happy that our social security system is taking a different route. Evidence from claimants and others who have used the system saw a clear contrast in the way in which people are treated. Not everyone can work, and that can be for a variety of reasons. Not everyone can work full time, not everyone can work regular hours and, over and above that, a person's circumstances can change at any point in life. That is why it is key that we have a robust and compassionate social security system in place to protect our citizens.

Let us get down to the real issue here. We can highlight all day long the positive steps that the Scottish Government is taking with just 15 per cent of welfare powers. While the Scottish Government is actively encouraging benefit take-up and investing in social security, UK Government welfare policies are deliberately penalising those who need it the most in our society. It is notable that the UK Government does not have its own comparable benefits take-up strategy, but not only is the UK Government shirking its moral responsibility to encourage benefits take-up, its welfare policies are actively harming people, causing poverty, destitution and hunger. It is embarrassing to listen to members speaking about the "broad shoulders" of the United Kingdom Government, when that Government has imposed the two-child limit, the benefit cap, the removal of the £20 uplift and the continuation of the bedroom

tax. Those are just some of the aspects of the UK benefit system that have deliberately hurt people.

Only with independence can we ensure that we have at our disposal all the economic levers to protect our social security budget from the car crash that the Tories have made of our economy—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up now, Ms Don.

Natalie Don: —and to protect ourselves from red Tories in the Labour branch office who bow to their masters down in London and will indeed overlook Scotland, as they already have for decades. We will—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Don, I ask you to resume your seat.

Natalie Don: I will wind up.

15:49

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Social security in Scotland is undergoing its biggest transformation in generations. With that comes many opportunities, but the journey is not without its challenges. The system's success is essential for the wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of our fellow Scots, and it is in the interests of all parties in the chamber to support the system where appropriate.

I am a member of the Public Audit Committee, and the section 23 report about the progress of implementing the devolved benefits was one of the few positive reports that the committee has discussed over the past few months. The Auditor General for Scotland noted that

“the implementation of the”

new

“social security powers”

was

“going well.”

However, he drew the committee's attention to substantial risks that remain unaddressed.

To look at the positives, Social Security Scotland now administers 12 benefits. As mentioned in the motion, we are now seeing automation of some of those benefits, which is a welcome development. Child winter heating assistance is paid automatically, based on entitlement, and the carers allowance supplement payments are made automatically. In addition, by the end of the year, the Scottish Government is aiming to award the best start grant, the early learning payment and the school age payment automatically to eligible families in receipt of the Scottish child payment, which is welcome news.

However, as I mentioned, new systems face challenges and Social Security Scotland is not immune to those. When giving evidence to the Public Audit Committee, the Auditor General highlighted three

“substantial remaining risks, including assessing relevant data, putting in place longer-term digital solutions and getting operational staffing in place.”

He went on to say that

“Managing those effectively will be crucial.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 23 June 2022; c 29.]

Therefore, I will use some of my time today to focus specifically on the issue of data collection and measuring outcomes.

Lack of data is a problem that has been highlighted in numerous Audit Scotland reports. I believe that all of us across the chamber can agree that without data it is near impossible to determine whether solutions are cost effective and are achieving the desired outcomes. We need to be looking at the outcomes; otherwise, it is like throwing money into the fire, and the people whom we are trying to help see no long-term benefit.

As it stands, the baseline data is there to tell us how many of those who are entitled are claiming a benefit, but it does not go much further than that. For example, less than one third of eligible Scots took up the job start payment—that is the lowest estimated take-up rate for any Scottish benefit. Only 73 per cent of those who were estimated to be eligible for the young carer grant claimed it in 2021-22, and only 66 per cent of eligible Scots received the funeral support payment.

Why? The truth is that we do not know. We need to find out why—what is preventing people from applying? We need to find out what the barriers are and remove them. We need to speak to the people on the ground to find out what is happening, but, more importantly, we need to listen and to take action. I noted what the minister said in his speech about the actions that he is taking and that he is going to write to us about them, which will be appreciated.

Poor data collection and evaluation are persistent problems that the Government regularly runs into. One policy area that has been negatively impacted by the absence of sufficient data collection and evaluation is tackling child poverty. As highlighted in Audit Scotland's “Tackling Child Poverty” report, it is abundantly clear that a crucial barrier to developing sufficiently targeted policies is the absence of children and families with lived experience of poverty in the policy development stage. Again, that is something that I have noted on various topics in various reports. We need to spend more time in the policy development stage, work out what it is that we want to achieve, listen to stakeholders and

put in timescales, targets and measurements for outcomes.

We should be using every tool at our disposal to understand why there is only partial uptake of some benefits and whether they are even delivering the desired outcomes. A system that does not listen to the people whom it sets out to help is simply unsustainable. It requires two-way communication. In fact, a key recommendation of the “Tackling Child Poverty” report includes working with stakeholders such as

“local government, the third sector,”

the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and people

“with lived experience of poverty to ... set out how ... actions ... will be delivered, monitored, and their impact evaluated.”

I reiterate that no matter how much or how little progress has been made, if the Scottish Government truly wants to build a system that works for Scotland, the data must capture a detailed picture of that system’s workings and its impact, and stakeholder involvement must be woven throughout its operation. Given the ever-changing nature of the external environment, the system must be flexible, adaptable to change and set up with the input of stakeholders.

15:55

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I understand that this is not a registrable interest, but in the interests of transparency, and as other colleagues have indicated the same, I state that I am now in receipt of adult disability payment.

I have been really happy to see the efforts that the Scottish Government has made to make applying for, and receiving, new Scottish benefits as easy and accessible as possible.

Just last week, I noticed a sponsored column in my local newspaper, *The Inverness Courier*, which directed people to the Scottish Government’s cost of living support page—www.gov.scot/costoflivingsupport. The next morning, the fancy online graphic of a sponsored post promoting the same web page popped up on my Facebook home feed. It was great to hear the minister talk earlier about the translation efforts and the leaflet campaign that is going on as well.

Effort and money are being put in by the Government, not to gatekeep and confuse, but to reach out to people and make them aware of what they might be entitled to. Ensuring that people can access the support that they need is a moral and legal duty, so it should not be surprising or refreshing to hear that that is happening, but to

those of us with experience of trying to get help from the DWP, it really is.

Visiting the headquarters in Dundee remains a highlight of my time as an MSP so far. On Jeremy Balfour’s earlier point about regional delivery, I have been in touch with the relationship lead for Shetland, Orkney, Moray and the Highlands, following round robins from the minister and the agency, and I look forward to my visit to the local delivery team in Inverness later this month. I encourage MSPs of every party to ensure that they are doing all that they can to get information about Scottish support to their constituents.

It is right that today’s motion focuses on “progress”. It means that we can recognise that we have come a long way and that there is more to come. Nobody is claiming that the system is now complete and as good as it will ever be.

I have a lot of sympathy with Labour and my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy’s asks, and I am sure that they are being put forward in good faith. However, we have to recognise that going too fast risks the safe and secure takeover that the Scottish Government has prioritised.

Automation is complex. It is not unreasonable to acknowledge that complexity or for the Scottish Government to ensure that it gets things right the first time. The progress on automation has been impressive and welcome: carers allowance supplement is automatically given to those people who receive carers allowance and child winter heating assistance is automatically paid to those people with qualifying benefits. The fact that the best start grant early learning and school age payments will be added to that list of automatic payments by the end of this month is extremely welcome news.

There seems to be extremely welcome news just about every day at the moment—the doubling of the fuel insecurity fund, the doubling of the Scottish child payment bridging payment, and £1.4 million for islanders with higher energy costs, which will mean so much to so many in my region. The new systems that Social Security Scotland is building are fantastic. They are a world away from Whitehall’s “Computer says no” attitude and claims that payments cannot be increased because of limitations in the software.

However, what holds us back are the very limited fiscal powers in place here—if we can neither borrow nor overspend, we cannot react to crises. Whatever we do with the 30-ish per cent of social security powers that we have here, our constituents are still subject to humiliating and degrading treatment if they need universal credit or another benefit that is still administered by the DWP. We have to keep in mind that that punitive approach does absolutely no good in tackling the

massive stigma that still exists around social security, because even those people who are entitled to, and getting, some help might not be comfortable seeking out further help. Regardless of how well automated the system is, tackling that stigma will still be a worthwhile endeavour. To automate top-ups, people still have to be in receipt of the passporting benefit. We need to get to a place where nobody is ashamed or afraid to ask for basic help.

It is interesting that the Tories have focused on data collection in their amendment; I wonder whether their members think that it is okay that the DWP repeatedly refuses to publish the data that it collects. A committee in Westminster had to use special powers to publish a DWP report on disabled people's experience of its benefits system. We cannot compare Social Security Scotland's client satisfaction rate of more than 90 per cent with that of the DWP because it has not published those figures in years.

The Tories do not have a better strategy for social security; they do not have a strategy at all beyond criticising the Scottish Government. While the SNP Government focused on increasing benefit uptake, the Tory Government down south—

Miles Briggs: Emma Roddick says that the Conservatives criticise the Scottish Government, but she will be fully aware that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, of which we are both members, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee are also raising those very concerns with ministers. It is important to put that on the record.

Emma Roddick: There are ways to raise concerns, and I think, as one of its members, that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee does great scrutiny work. However, the hypocrisy in the Tory amendment is worth pointing out.

The Tory Government down south decided to increase the threshold for people having to actively search for work before being sanctioned. It focused on taking benefits away, during a cost of living crisis, for those with the least. Child Poverty Action Group told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee:

"We have evidence that strict conditionality does not help people to find better jobs, better-paid jobs or more hours. In fact, poverty in itself is a barrier to people being employed."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 22 September 2022; c 32.]

Not only is the approach down south cruel; it is ineffective. It does not work, so much so that the DWP—again—does not publish data on just how bad it is.

That is why, although both Governments working together in this set-up is necessary, we

cannot put politics aside. Political ideology is what determines whether a person or party believes in spending money or not, whether they prioritise helping people or funnelling money to those who already have more than they can use, and whether they move money around in the budget to increase the Scottish child payment or to increase bankers' bonuses. Politics matters—it is our job. We cannot leave politics at the door when we discuss social security, because my idea of what a social security system—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up now, Ms Roddick.

Emma Roddick: —would look like with dignity, fairness and respect at its heart is extremely different from that of the Tories.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, particularly for those who are taking interventions, to keep members to six minutes, but we have no time in hand.

16:02

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): With more than one in 10 eligible people not claiming the Scottish child payment, one in three not applying for funeral support, which is concerning, and only 29 per cent claiming job support, we can see that we have a huge job to do to ensure that people claim the benefits for which they are eligible. I am sure that we all agree on that. During my time as deputy convener of the Social Security Committee, I recognised that many families were entitled to vital financial support that they were not claiming, and I championed that issue at the time.

I am sure that SNP members will give Scottish Labour some credit for the work that we did in the early years of the creation of the social security system. We championed a Scottish social security system that was fit for purpose—on that, we, the SNP and even some Conservative members were as one. Mark Griffin put essential elements into the 2018 act, and I want to talk about some of them, including the importance of automating social security benefits.

I moved the Labour amendment to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill on

"supporting local authorities to consider the automatic payment of benefits and support".

There is also a duty on the social security agency in Scotland to check, on someone's application for a benefit, whether they have other benefits. I have not heard much about that. Those are the kind of distinguishing things that are meant to set apart the Scottish system from the Westminster system, so we need to see evidence that those provisions are being used.

In 2018, I convened a round-table meeting on automation in order to explore the options that we needed to be looking at, particularly for the figures that we have considered today. I agree with Emma Roddick that automation is not a simple thing to do, but we need to be ambitious about it, and I am fully content that the Scottish Labour amendment asks the Government to be so, because here we are in 2022—four years later.

The round-table meeting that I conducted brought together local authorities, anti-poverty campaigners, other MSPs and the then minister, Jeane Freeman, who was very keen on the idea of automation. We discussed the automation of benefits such as free school meals and the school clothing grant to help to reduce the number of children living in poverty. Glasgow City Council, which is the authority for the region that Pam Duncan-Glancy and I represent, has been extremely good on that, and it is definitely worth looking at what it has done. There were 3,500 children who were eligible for free school meals but were not registered for them and therefore not accessing that important benefit. I think that that situation exists across the country.

An important point that no one has mentioned so far is that single parents, in particular, are a group who do not apply for eligible benefits, because the very nature of being a single parent means that filling in forms is not first on their agenda. There are many reasons why automation of benefits is really important.

When it automated the school clothing grant, Glasgow City Council's financial inclusion department said that people were phoning up to say, "I've got this cheque for £200—I think there's been a mistake," and they had to be told that it was money that they were entitled to. We can see the change that automation of benefits can make to people's lives.

Pam Duncan-Glancy is also right to mention the issue of redetermination, the Scottish system's approach to which was meant to set us apart from Westminster. I confess to the minister that I am a wee bit out of touch on the issue, so he should feel free to intervene on me. The idea behind that was that we would get it right first time so that fewer people would have to appeal, and that the appeals system would be easier for people. If the Government cannot demonstrate that that is the case in 2022, I would like to think that the minister would put his hand up and recognise that, four years on, the Government has not got that right.

Ben Macpherson: I thank Pauline McNeill for taking an intervention, and Pam Duncan-Glancy for raising the issue. I re-emphasise to Parliament that the situation that Pam Duncan-Glancy raised with regard to redeterminations on child disability payments is not one that I recognise and not one

that has been brought to my attention when I have had discussions with my officials about child disability payments. Let us all look at the issue carefully and liaise together.

Pauline McNeill: I am pleased to hear that answer, and I am sure that Pam Duncan-Glancy is, too. A lot of time was spent on the provision in question at the time. There is a further provision that says that, should someone lose their redetermination, all the paperwork for their appeal will automatically be sent to the tribunal. That is another way of helping people to make an application for their appeal. There are lots of things that set our social security system apart.

We know that 104,000 children under six are already getting the Scottish child payment and that, given the Government's very welcome announcement to extend the scheme, an additional 300,000 children could be eligible. With uptake at only 87 per cent, we must find out why the rest of those who are eligible are not applying for that benefit. That is another reason why automation of benefits is really important.

The Resolution Foundation suggested that, sadly, Scottish child poverty could rise by 29 per cent by 2023-24. I think that we all agree that there has never been a more important time for us to get our work in this area right to ensure that people get the benefits that they are entitled to.

We have all used the term "the cost of living crisis", which, in many ways, is an innocuous-sounding phrase. However, the grim reality is that behind that phrase lies hungry children, anxious families and mothers who are going without basic essentials. We can change that. Higher levels of automation would ensure that families receive the support that they are entitled to.

I stress that I welcome the progress that has been made, but, four years on, I ask ministers to think very carefully about what else can be done. One of the issues is to do with data sharing, which I recognise is a complex area. We must and can do better, and it is up to the Scottish ministers to be more ambitious.

I am happy to support the Labour amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members who are expecting to speak to check that they have pressed their buttons.

16:08

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I am delighted to speak in this afternoon's debate and to support the Scottish Government's motion. The automation and take-up of benefits is an important issue that merits our attention.

As the motion says, the positive impact that the existing automation of Scottish social security payments is having is very welcome. That impact includes ensuring that the most eligible people receive the child winter heating assistance and the carers allowance supplement without needing to apply. The proposal to automate the best start grant early learning payment and the best start grant school-age payment for eligible families, which the committee discussed a few weeks ago, is very welcome, too.

As the minister mentioned, the Scottish Government also intends to continue to explore the opportunities that exist for further automation. That will involve looking at opportunities to ensure that more people get the benefits that they are entitled to, which is especially important during the current cost of living crisis. The committee has discussed that with the minister in detail.

Uptake of benefits is also key at this time. The Scottish Government has launched a one-stop shop with its new cost of living website, which Emma Roddick spoke about earlier.

Scotland offers a unique level of support with benefits such as the Scottish child payment. The Scottish Government also decided to increase eight Scottish benefits by 6 per cent in April 2022, compared with a 3 per cent increase by the UK Government. The UK Government must immediately commit to raising benefits in line with inflation. If it chooses not to do so, it will, according to research by the Child Poverty Action Group, be responsible for pushing 200,000 children into poverty.

The Tory UK Government focuses more on sanctioning than supporting people. The number of sanctions issued against universal credit claimants in Scotland has almost doubled in the past three years—doubled. That demonstrates a fundamental issue with the DWP's attitude towards those on lower incomes, which prevents vulnerable families from receiving the social security that they are entitled to when they need it most. That is a political choice. Natalie Don mentioned the two-child limit and the bedroom tax. Again, those are political choices.

In comparison, and in line with Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts, the Scottish Government is committing £4.2 billion in social security spending, which will rise to £6.5 billion by 2026-27. That additional spending is needed for the Scottish child payment and to fund the improved approach that Social Security Scotland will take with its adult disability payment, as opposed to the different approach taken with PIP.

Social security is a demand-led service, so we need the ability to react to the current increase in demand. I can understand the Tory position of not

wanting increased borrowing powers, but I cannot in any way, shape or form understand Labour's position of not supporting giving more powers to Scotland to tackle the issue.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: At what point in any of our speeches today did we mention borrowing powers at all?

Paul McLennan: They were not mentioned in the speeches today, but the issue has been raised in the committee. It was discussed even this morning and Labour would not support our position.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take another intervention?

Paul McLennan: No. I am struggling for time, which the Presiding Officer has warned us about.

The Child Poverty Action Group sent a briefing for the debate, highlighting three key areas. Pauline McNeill mentioned data sharing, which is the first step towards the automation of low-income social security benefits and other low-income payments such as those delivered by local authorities. Aligning the eligibility criteria for low-income benefits would make the automation and promotion of take-up easier, which the committee has discussed. Universal payment and high rates of take-up have a vital role to play in tackling poverty.

I will touch on some of the points that CPAG raised. It welcomed the Scottish Government's ambition to automate payments to low-income households, but it raised the issue of access to data, saying that data sharing is key to automation and that it helps in making decisions about spending and resource allocation so that support can be targeted at the families who are most in need. The committee has raised that subject with the minister, and I ask him to pick it up in his closing speech.

We should, of course, be aiming for 100 per cent take-up of the Scottish child payment and other low-income benefits. Local authorities have individual household data about many low-income families and already deliver support to those families on behalf of the Scottish Government. Social Security Scotland has access to data from the DWP and HM Revenue and Customs to allow for the processing of Scottish child payment claims. I know that data sharing arrangements can be complex, but, if solutions can be found, that would allow the identification of families who might be entitled to additional support such as the Scottish child payment and school clothing grants. I know that the Scottish Government is looking at that complex situation.

CPAG welcomed the commitment in "Best Start, Bright Futures" to bring entitlement for best start

foods in line with the entitlement criteria for best start grants and the Scottish child payment. That will make automation easier for Social Security Scotland. During committee discussions, members mentioned the benefits of aligning the entitlement criteria for other payments. School clothing grants and free school meals could be aligned with the Scottish child payment. That would make automation easier, simplify messaging and ensure greater take-up.

The Scottish Government is unique in its support for the most vulnerable in society. The automation of existing and future benefits will make take-up easier and support even more people.

16:14

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I join my parliamentary colleagues in welcoming the work that has gone into the automation of Scottish social security payments, the proposals to extend that further and the acknowledgement that there is more work to do. Those payments are vital to the wellbeing of people across Scotland, both in supporting their day-to-day expenses and at critical times, especially in the lives of young families.

I also welcome the work that has been done previously in development and, over the past year, in implementation of the second benefit take-up strategy. The principles that underpin that strategy are worth reiterating, especially now, when the existing challenges of child poverty and Covid recovery have been so heartbreakingly deepened by brutal food price rises, terrifying energy costs and Westminster policy that swings between incompetence and outright cruelty. The principles are focusing on real people and their actual needs; speaking and listening with clarity and sensitivity; reaching people where they are and not where we assume that we will find them; co-operating with those working for the same common good; and learning from both successes and mistakes. Those are principles that we can usefully apply not only to social security but to all the issues that we face as a Parliament, a country and a world.

The strategy also identifies barriers to the take-up of social security entitlements. One of those is the ways in which access can be so complex—and so costly in terms of time and energy as well as money—that the process itself acts as a wall instead of a doorway. That is a challenge to policy makers and to systems, and it can be addressed, in part, by the automation that we are focusing on in the debate.

Another barrier is lack of information. That, too, is an issue for those who make and implement policy—not just at national level but in local

government and other agencies—and here we should remember and celebrate the crucial role of the third sector.

However, it is clear from evidence from other European countries that, even with very slick and integrated systems such as those that Pam Duncan-Glancy and other members have urged Social Security Scotland to develop, take-up remains below 100 per cent. That is why the final barrier identified in the strategy matters, and it involves us all: it consists of the complex and often hidden and deep-rooted social obstacles that still stand between so many people and fulfilment of their rights.

The Scottish campaign on rights to social security, which represents key organisations, has written wisely about institutional stigma from official processes, social stigma from the attitudes of others and self-stigma—a person's own feeling that it is somehow shameful or negative to be receiving what they are entitled to. We know only too well the role that toxic media and poisonous politics have played in creating, extending and embedding the discourse of shame, stigma, othering and demonisation. We know how it interrelates with other forms of bigotry and prejudice, and with other expressions of hate and hostility—not least that of the current Home Secretary, just this week, towards people who were seeking the protection of the United Nations Refugee Convention, which lays down a solemn obligation that it is her particular duty to uphold.

One of our most serious responsibilities as members of this Parliament is to challenge the language of stigma, exclusion and hate. We have a secondary responsibility as well. It is to tell different stories, based on evidence and experience, of why and how social security supports and builds the common good and helps to create strong communities, thriving families and healthy, confident, informed and compassionate children who are ready to take their place in the society of the future—one that will need them more than ever before.

I think that we have a third responsibility: to think not only about how we talk about those who are in, or at risk of, poverty, but also about how we talk about the rich. How does our language—phrases such as “philanthropist”, “wealth creator” and “business leader”—together with our concepts of aspiration and success and the speed with which our doors are opened reinforce hierarchies that are based on money, privilege, status and profoundly ableist conceptions of competence and contribution? In a world where net subsidies to the fossil fuel industry were more than \$4 billion in 2019, it is not social security recipients who are taking more than they give.

I reiterate my welcome for the automation measures and for the on-going work that is being done at many levels and in many sectors to improve rates of social security take-up. However, that is not just work for policy makers, institutions and advice providers—vital though all those actors are. If we are to build the fair, resilient, compassionate and creative Scotland that we long for, we need to dig deep, uncover and challenge the assumptions that we have brought with us, and recognise and celebrate our interdependence. This is a work in progress. We need to keep going, and we need to keep going better.

16:19

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, as Scotland continues to develop its own distinct social security system. It remains my hope, and the hope of members on the Conservative benches, that that journey will result in a distinctly Scottish social security system that is tailored effectively to Scotland's needs.

One year ago, the Parliament debated this Government's progress on implementing the social security powers, as well as its obligation to promote the uptake of those benefits. Since then, the social security picture in Scotland has continued to develop. Most notably, as we have heard, the adult disability payment has finally been introduced across all areas of Scotland. Although I welcome the nationwide launch of what is the 12th benefit to be delivered by Social Security Scotland, it is disappointing that it has taken so long to get to this point. In addition, it remains the case that it will not be until 2025 that the Government will finish taking on all the devolved benefits under the powers that it has.

While Social Security Scotland continues to grow its capacity, it has not been without its problems. The total cost has doubled in comparison with original estimates, and administration costs have quadrupled. It is disappointing that, given those costs, the agency will be no cheaper to run than the DWP system that it is designed to replace.

Social Security Scotland lost nearly £65 billion to fraud and error last year; that cannot be allowed to increase in scale as its case load grows significantly in the coming years.

Ben Macpherson: For clarity, as these points are important, I point out that I am sure that the member meant to say £65 million, not £65 billion. I recognise the need for us to continue to reduce that figure through diligence.

Alexander Stewart: I thank the minister for that clarification—that is quite correct.

The satisfaction levels of service users must also improve. It is important that we look at that, because there has been a 74 per cent increase in the number of complaints received in the past year alone.

With 475,000 cases to administer by 2026 for the adult disability payment alone, it is important that the Scottish public receive the services that they rightly expect. I certainly hope that Social Security Scotland does not face any further problems, because if the agency is to succeed, we will all benefit across Scotland. That is vitally important.

More generally, several issues with benefit take-up remain. For example, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee highlighted the problems that a lack of internet access can create where digital access is required to ensure that people can apply for and get benefits. That is especially true for older people, who are more likely than other groups to live in remote and rural areas where internet access is more likely to be a problem. The issue is made worse by the fact that only one in 10 people between the ages of 65 and 79 are able to use a computer effectively, as shown by research that Citizens Advice Scotland carried out.

It is important that Social Security Scotland continues to engage with older people, and with other vulnerable service users, to ensure that its systems are properly tailored to their needs. It should also engage with the committee's recommendation to increase internet access in public places such as libraries and community hubs.

Of course, automation is potentially key in increasing take-up of benefits among those who are eligible. In a complex social security system, it remains the case that many families simply are not fully aware of what they are entitled to. As such, anything that can simplify the process of ensuring that payments go to all those who are entitled to them is to be welcomed.

To that end, the automation of payments such as the best start grant and school-age payments will, I hope, provide a significant boost to the overall take-up of those benefits. There is no doubt that the automation of certain payments can also have benefits in other areas, including processing speed and good value for taxpayer money; we need only look at some of the automated elements of universal credit for an example of that. It remains to be seen, however, whether such automation can be adopted more widely across the Scottish social security system. I urge the Scottish Government to take an evidence-based approach when assessing how effective that will be.

When it comes to Scotland's social security system, any progress is to be welcomed, but there is still a long way to go on this journey.

With devolved social security spending projected to increase by £2.5 billion by 2027, it is important that we get this right at all levels. It is important that the Scottish Government works constructively with the UK Government, and I am delighted to have heard from the minister today that he wants to ensure that there is good dialogue and good discussion. It is equally important that we engage with service users to ensure that all benefits are being delivered as effectively as possible.

In conclusion, the coming years will be crucial to getting the system right and ensuring that it is something that we all can be proud of, rather than a missed opportunity. To that end, there is much that we can look forward to, and I hope for a successful journey. Like others, I will continue to ensure that this Government delivers the social security system that the Scottish public expects and deserves.

15:25

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I cannot speak in a debate on social security without highlighting my disgust at the hostile and cruel welfare system that is overseen by the Tories in Westminster. Their treatment of working people, their lack of compassion in helping those most in need and their intrusive and discriminatory assessments are representative of a Government that is not fit for office.

I must say that the Scottish Conservatives are also responsible for the actions of the UK Government in relation to welfare and social security. Their lack of opposition to—and, in some cases, their involvement in—a Government that has overseen such brutal cuts to social security is shameless. However, as colleagues have said before, I stress that we must work across the Parliament to tackle the impacts of the cost of living crisis in order to ensure that more people are not forced into poverty and to alleviate the pressures that face working families on a daily basis.

The ambition of the Scottish Government to automate payments to low-income households, whether delivered by Social Security Scotland or local authorities, is welcome. The Scottish Government says that it is committed to delivering a transparent social security system and reporting annually on progress, and that is also welcome.

In the first annual publication providing estimates of the benefit take-up rate, the minister said:

“We are committed to making sure everyone gets the financial support they are entitled to and our benefit take-up strategy outlines how we are doing this. We actively work to encourage take-up of Scottish social security benefits by promoting our 12 benefits, collaborating with various organisations and removing barriers to access.”

I appreciate that the minister wants that to happen, as I have said before, and I do not doubt that many of the Government backbenchers want that, too.

However, as we have seen in today's debate, we need to be a bit more honest about what the movement is. If we are not honest, how are we going to achieve the outcomes that the minister and the Government want? We must not ignore the fact that these measures are coming too late and too slowly for many, and will not be enough for others.

We should also not ignore the fact that this is a powerful Parliament. It has the power to do something, but this Government acts with no urgency and seems little ready—or, perhaps, little able—to use those powers. As we have heard from across the chamber, it has been four years since the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was passed, yet the Scottish Government is not expecting to take over full control of the system from the DWP until the end of 2025.

In December 2021, the Scottish Government boasted that

“2022 will be our biggest year yet in building a new social security system for Scotland”,

but today it has come to the chamber with a motion that contains a list of fantasy predictions of what the Scottish benefits system will look like.

I have acknowledged that the Scottish Government has made some progress, and I acknowledge the benefit that the existing automation of Scottish social security payments is bringing, including ensuring that the most eligible people receive the child winter heating assistance and the carers allowance supplement without having to apply for them. I believe that that is a good thing, and I welcome it, as other speakers have done. However, as is often the case, the motion is self-congratulatory. The Government and its backbenchers need to understand that there is some urgency to the issue.

The system is not even nearly fully automated, and we have heard how important that is if we are to lift our communities out of poverty. The take-up of Scottish benefits is not complete. More than one in 10 people who are eligible do not claim the child payment; one in four people do not claim the young carer grant; and one in three people do not claim their funeral support payment. The Government has not mentioned any plans to automate the benefits for the largest case load—

the Scottish child payment. There is an estimated of 304,000, and 353,000 claims, for the adult disability payments. By comparison, the number of claims that have not been automated is tiny.

It is important that we think critically on the Opposition and Government benches. I believe that the Government wants to get better systems in place for people. It is important to note that over three quarters of devolved social security spending is still administered by the Department for Work and Pensions. As I mentioned when I intervened on Natalie Don, Labour members are so keen to raise again and again what more can be done because we want the compassionate system that the Government and its back benchers speak about so much.

If the Scottish Government does not get a grip and alter the speed of change, child poverty targets will be missed and more children will grow up in poverty. I accept that any additional support for children and their families is welcome, and I have welcomed the child payment before, but a lot more urgency is needed. It is time to keep moving forward, to keep making progress, to be more radical, to end child poverty and to support families and those most in need using all the powers that the Government has at all the times when it can do so. That has to be the Parliament's aim, and I will continue to hold the Scottish Government to account on that.

I will be the first person to stand up to oppose Tory UK Government cuts to social security benefits, but it is clear that, in Scotland, we can, and must, do more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kaukab Stewart, who is the final speaker in the open debate. We will then move to the winding-up speeches. I expect everybody who has participated in the debate to be present then.

16:32

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Presiding Officer,

“social security is itself a human right and essential to the realisation of other human rights”.

That statement in the 2018 act affirms the Scottish Government's commitment to develop a benefits system that is accessible and efficient, with dignity, respect and fairness at its core.

As we know, 12 individual benefits are currently delivered by the Scottish Government to people across the country. Seven of them are new and unique to Scotland, and all of them are of vital importance to those who are in receipt of them. We also know that the development of Scotland's social security system reflects the lived experience of users of the much-criticised DWP systems.

Having heard of the often callous and distressing way that people feel that they are treated in engaging with the DWP, I am glad that the Scottish Government has taken an entirely different approach to administering and delivering benefits. People are supported at all stages, and they can request extra support. The application process includes the innovative local delivery service in every council area, which means that anyone who applies for Scottish benefits can access direct support from an adviser.

At the end of last year, more than 90 per cent of those who responded to the Scottish Government's survey described their experience with Social Security Scotland as “very good” or “good”. However, it is clear that there is work to be done to reach 100 per cent take-up—or as close to that as we can get. Automation is, of course, key among the means of achieving that. Automated benefits dramatically improve the experience of eligible people and remove the need for multiple applications.

Along with campaigners, I welcome the imminent automation of the best start grant early learning payment and the best start grant school-age payment, and I urge the Government to move as swiftly as possible to automate further benefits in the interests of increasing uptake.

The recent One Parent Families Scotland report, “Living without a lifeline”, acknowledged the importance of the Scottish child payment. The increase from £10 to £25 for each eligible child and the extension on 14 November to all young people up to the age of 16 will be welcomed by one-parent families, as it will by all eligible families.

Described as a game-changing benefit by John Dickie, director of the Child Poverty Action Group, it is providing essential support at a time when the UK economy is in free-fall and making life so difficult for so many people. It goes without saying that our goal must be for 100 per cent take-up of the benefit.

I ask the minister in his summing-up to confirm whether a further round of invitations to apply will be sent to all families to coincide with the extension of the Scottish child payment and to provide some detail on data-gathering on behalf of Social Security Scotland to support benefit take-up. I would also ask him to confirm that thresholds for eligibility are reviewed regularly so that they keep pace with the reality of income and expenditure.

Free school meals and the school clothing grant do not lie within the remit of Social Security Scotland. However, it would make a great difference if those payments could be automated for those who are in receipt of universal credit and

tax credits. I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is already acutely aware of that and is working with the UK Government on the provision of data to progress that—next year, we hope.

I was pleased to welcome Advice Direct Scotland to Parliament today. Supported with Scottish Government funding and based in my constituency of Glasgow Kelvin, it has a powerful benefits calculator on its website where people can check what Scottish benefits they are entitled to, including passported benefits. I commend that calculator to my colleagues and their constituents. Anyone struggling to check their entitlement can phone for friendly and helpful advice.

Social Security Scotland is a work in progress. It is growing in terms of the number of benefits that it delivers, the number of claimants that it supports, and the automation that it facilitates. It is delivering well for all those who are already engaged with it. Its urgent task is to identify those who are not yet claiming what they are entitled to and I urge the Government to consider all practical means of achieving that.

I am glad that the motion has been brought to the chamber so that we can celebrate the successes so far and move the debate forward so that we can improve further.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches. I am disappointed to note that, despite my earlier warning, a couple of colleagues who participated in the debate are not here. I expect an explanation for that.

16:38

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. Once again, less than six months after those in the Scottish Government last patted themselves on the back over their delivery of social security benefits, they have presented us with another motion of self-congratulation. Once again, the motion does not represent the reality on the ground and, once again, the significant points of caution in the Audit Scotland report on Social Security Scotland go unanswered.

My colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy has already noted the apparent lack of priority given to the automation of social security. Moreover, she has highlighted the amount of benefits that are still being left to be administered by the DWP, which is surely nothing to congratulate the Scottish Government on, if the entire point was for it to do things better.

The Scottish Labour amendment highlights many of those on-going problems, which were left out of the Scottish Government motion. There are

many problems waiting down the line in relation to the delivery of Scottish social security benefits, but I will focus on the so-called agile approach that the Scottish Government is overseeing in its IT system.

The theory is that that allows Social Security Scotland to be adaptable and to focus on must-have systems for launch before building on them later. Those systems will be crucial if automation is to work. However, in May, the Audit Scotland report made it clear that that approach has trade-offs. It says:

“For Social Security Scotland to operate efficiently and effectively, resources will be needed over the longer term to continue systems development and replace temporary and manual processes.”

It continues:

“The scale of this is not fully known and will need to be planned for alongside other government priorities”.

This remains a huge step in the dark by the Scottish Government.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Foyso Choudhury: I am running out of time, as I have a lot to go through.

What that agile approach has produced so far is a minimum viable product to onboard the initial social security benefits. As we have heard, it has automated only two so far, and too many benefits still rely on the DWP systems. What we do not know is how easily the system can be scaled, how well a scaled-up version will function and, crucially, how much any of that will cost. We already know that IT costs for Scotland’s social security system have soared to more than £250 million, from initial estimates of £39 million. Jeremy Balfour noted those additional costs.

When we on the Labour benches raised those questions in May’s debate, there was no answer from the Scottish Government on any of them. I suspect that that is because it does not have the answers. Audit Scotland certainly does not seem to think that it does. The consequence of that is that the Scottish people are being asked to take much of this purely on faith. Again, we need to note the looming £760 million black hole in the budget for Scottish social security benefits, as identified by Audit Scotland.

We cannot take on faith alone such a large and important part of the functioning of our social security system. The Scottish Labour amendment also notes the problems with take-up of the devolved benefits, as mentioned by my colleague Pauline McNeill. Pam Duncan-Glancy rightly noted that that could be solved by automation, but it has not yet been. The minister noted in his opening remarks that Scottish Labour’s amendment

engaged in “wishful thinking” in suggesting that automation had proceeded faster, yet he also said that the Scottish Government is not quite where it wants to be on the take-up of benefits.

Surely, that raises the question of why the Government has presented us with a motion declaring a job well done. Put simply, it is far too early for the Scottish Government to congratulate itself on matters of devolved benefits. For that and many other reasons, I commend the Scottish Labour amendment as a dose of reality.

16:44

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): It is important to recognise the context in which today’s debate is taking place. Indeed, the minister stated it at the beginning: the global cost of living crisis is impacting on the most economically vulnerable individuals and families across the UK. That is why both of Scotland’s Governments need to work together to address the pressures and to support people through this period.

It is also why we have called for and supported the delivery of targeted benefits by Social Security Scotland. In addition, it is worth reflecting on the fact that £243 billion of support is being delivered by the UK Government and the Scottish Government together to focus direct support on the most vulnerable families in Scotland and across Britain.

Emma Roddick: In Tuesday’s debate, the member asked me to welcome one of the measures that he is talking about—the £324 for people on tax credits. However, that money has been denied to people with a sanction, 7,342 of whom are in Scotland. Does the member welcome that?

Miles Briggs: Reviews are built into the system to look at such matters, and that is important. What is also important is how the system is being reformed, in the UK and in Scotland. I welcome that, and it is the work that I want to take forward in the committee.

Despite the SNP-Green Government’s motion for the debate, it must be said that the establishment of Social Security Scotland has not all been plain sailing. As Jeremy Balfour stated, we are all fully aware that SNP ministers have had to hand back to the DWP their administrative role with regard to many of the payments. I have to say, though, that I welcome the positive comments that the minister has often made in committee on the relationship between the two organisations. They have to work together, and we must ensure that they succeed in making our welfare system in our United Kingdom and here in Scotland work for everybody.

Ben Macpherson: I urge the member to ensure that, when he engages in any correspondence with the new DWP ministerial team at Westminster, he encourages them to do the same thing.

Miles Briggs: I am absolutely happy to do that.

SNP ministers have not put in place the full welfare system, despite the many promises that we have heard and, indeed, as was promised ahead of the 2021 elections. Audit Scotland continues to express concern about the challenging timescales for delivering all of the new devolved benefits. I have stated previously, and I state again today, that it is in all of our interests for Social Security Scotland to succeed and to deliver efficient and cost-effective assessment and payment systems. That said—I am sorry to tell SNP members this—it is the role of Opposition parties to hold ministers to account on these matters. We must focus on making sure that the delivery of Social Security Scotland is effective and that the outcomes that we all want are indeed delivered.

A few members have highlighted certain issues that I hope that the minister has taken on board. Alexander Stewart made an important point about the digital divide and why people might not be taking up the payments that are available, and Pauline McNeill raised the important issue of the funeral support payment for those who are planning funerals. Why have 40 per cent of the people who are entitled to that payment not taken it up? It is a real issue that ministers should have tackled by now.

Sharon Dowe referred to her work on the Public Audit Committee and talked about the Government ensuring that it takes an efficient look at value for money for the taxpayer. That is important. I also point out that the Parliament’s Social Justice and Social Security Committee and Finance and Public Administration Committee have raised concerns with the Scottish Government about its data collection system not being fully in place.

Foyso Choudhury made an important point about the projected costs for Social Security Scotland and delivering our welfare system. As of today, those costs are over £290 million, which equates to 10 per cent of its total resources for delivering payments, compared with the figure of 6 per cent for the Department for Work and Pensions. I know that those costs are projected to come in line, but we have had no data to allow us to see where we are and whether all of that is, as I hope, on track. I know from discussions with Social Security Scotland that that is the projection, but we need to hold ministers to account for it.

Today's debate presents an important opportunity to highlight the need for greater transparency, which is something that all the Parliament's committees have been highlighting and asking for. Audit Scotland has stated that the implementation costs of the new devolved benefits have not been routinely reported on in the public domain, and that situation needs to change—and change quickly—because it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to have the kind of proper scrutiny that we all want.

With regard to some of the other points that were raised earlier, the minister highlighted 90 per cent satisfaction with Social Security Scotland, but that was as the benefit system was being rolled out. As more benefits are being rolled out, it is concerning to note that client complaints have increased by 74 per cent in the space of one year. I note and welcome what the minister said with regard to looking at the appeals system and redeterminations. It is important to be sure about why there have been rapid increases in complaints around Social Security Scotland. We all want that to be addressed.

The Scottish Government needs to make clear its long-term vision for Social Security Scotland and lay out practical steps that it is taking to make sure that the body is more transparent and accessible to the public on the delivery of the new system.

The debate has brought up another matter. Some members raised the issue of independence and what they want to see, but there is a key part of Scottish public finances that no SNP member can get away from and that can be expressed simply, in two words: the Barnett formula. We are spending £8.5 billion of Scottish taxpayers' money because of the Barnett formula. I welcome that, because it is an important part of redistribution, and ministers and members of the SNP and the Green Party cannot simply wish that away—it is the size of the NHS budget in Scotland. Independence would leave an £8.5 billion black hole, and we need honesty from SNP and Green members over what would be cut.

One of the key things that today's debate has brought to the fore is the future, and this week's announcements show the future around our public finances. We must all work together to deliver Social Security Scotland and the payments for the people who desperately need them.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ben Macpherson to wind up the debate for the Government.

16:51

Ben Macpherson: I thank colleagues for an important debate in these serious times. Sharon Dowey made a very thoughtful and, in the

majority, fair contribution and, at the beginning of her remarks, she made the important point that it is in the interests of all parties to support Social Security Scotland and for us to work together in the service of our constituents to make sure that the service delivers for people, particularly at this time.

Pauline McNeill and others raised important points around data sharing. I confirm that, in this time ahead, we will continue to work with many parties, including local authorities, the DWP and HMRC, to improve data sharing and increase take-up, and that also extends to our work on automation.

Kaukab Stewart asked me some particular questions regarding thresholds. We continue to keep them under review. When the Scottish child payment is extended and uplifted, we will, indeed, text message and email all current claimants to make them aware of the extra support that is available.

As I set out in my opening statement, and others have set out today, that demonstrates the practical and proactive work that is under way to promote benefits in our communities. Of course, the Scottish Government—rightly, under the 2018 act—is obligated to take a lead in that. Beatrice Wishart raised a question around what specific engagement the Scottish Government is taking to promote benefits. In my opening remarks, I laid out the 12 paid-for marketing campaigns that have been undertaken since October 2021. In consideration of digital exclusion, to promote our benefits, we used a range of channels on television, as well as radio, print and digital. For example, when adult disability payment was launched across Scotland at the end of August, there were eight pieces of broadcast television and radio coverage across national and regional channels, and 44 pieces of print and online, as well as individual engagement by organisations and MSPs to promote the benefits.

Miles Briggs: Given the system and how you plan, what work has been done specifically with regard to funeral support payment? Forty per cent of eligible people are not applying for that payment.

Ben Macpherson: It is an important point and it is encouraging that the amount of support that people are getting through funeral support payment is much higher than it was under the previous UK benefit. There is a lot of engagement with providers and relevant support organisations to encourage people to take up that support.

Evaluative work is going on as we speak, based on the estimates that were published on Monday for the first time, which is the useful data that Kaukab Stewart talked about. The fact that we

now have the estimated data helps us in that analysis, and I am happy to engage more with Mr Briggs on the matter. He is right that we want to get the uptake of funeral support payment to a much higher level.

I confirm to Jeremy Balfour that welfare rights advisers are in around 150 GP practices around Scotland, so that is happening. I am happy to pick that up further with him if he would like more details.

I will talk about some of the wider points that were raised and the thematic issues that matter to us all. Alexander Stewart said that we want Social Security Scotland to be something that we can all be proud of. I am proud of Social Security Scotland. It is not perfect, but what it has achieved in its short existence since 2018 with the thousands and thousands of people it has helped, and the way in which it has developed with 21st century infrastructure and a proactive approach based on the values that we agreed as a Parliament, are things to be proud of. That is why I find it so deeply unhelpful when members, especially one as well intentioned and well informed as Jeremy Balfour, call Social Security Scotland a mess. That is such an unjust characterisation of an organisation that is helping people every single day and is staffed by such well-motivated people.

Jeremy Balfour: I genuinely do not believe that I used those words in my speech. My point was that, due to the Scottish Government—nothing to do with the agency—there have been major delays in delivering those benefits. I ask the minister to please correct the record; I never called the agency a mess.

Ben Macpherson: The process of rolling out our delivery of devolved Scottish benefits and Social Security Scotland being that delivery agency are part of the same equation. Opposition members are absolutely right to hold the Government to account, but when we are doing things well in Scotland, let us be honest about the achievements as well as about the challenges, and about how those achievements make a difference to all the constituents we serve.

Social Security Scotland is a success story. Foysoyl Choudhury raised a point about IT costs, but he followed that by speaking about how he wants to see more expenditure. We have to get a degree of consistency and fair analysis when it comes to this question. The agency is at the beginning of its development, but it will be a really important organisation that will deliver for all our constituents, particularly this year compared with years past but also in the decades ahead. We are investing in and establishing firm and effective foundations to do that.

When Carol Mochan and other Labour members talk about a sense of urgency, I can tell them that there is a deep sense of urgency in the ministerial team and in the civil service about doing this as quickly as possible. There is also a sense of responsibility for doing it right and effectively, not only for the short term but in order to future proof the service.

Social Security Scotland is a very successful delivery organisation, so when the Scottish Labour Party criticises the SNP—which, as I mentioned, is responsible for gaining the powers over social security here in Scotland—and says that we have not done very much and the debate is about back patting, I will not take that. Around 25,000 children in Scotland are getting £200 through our child winter heating assistance, and the Scottish child payment—which was £10 a week, is now £20 a week and will be £25 a week from 14 November—is helping people now. We have had an effective roll-out of the bridging payment to 140,000 households. That represents a significant amount of investment that is helping people in our constituencies day in, day out.

By the end of 2022, our five family payments could be worth up to £10,000 when the first child turns six, and up to £9,700 for subsequent children. That is significant. It is an investment in our communities. Do not talk that down as if it is not a remarkable achievement. Some £460 million is going to households above the block grant adjustment, and that is more than in any other part of the UK.

Let us be really serious about this. We have done remarkable things with the powers that we have, and we have a lot more to do. We need members from all the parties to be thoughtful and realistic about the lesson from Social Security Scotland that taking the time to do things correctly enables good delivery. It is an example from which we can take learning and confidence.

I will end on what I hope is a point of consensus. I hope that everybody votes for the motion, because I have drafted it to be consensual. We all have a responsibility—whether through cost of living events in our constituencies, the social media that we engage in, the communications from our political parties, or whatever ways we share things in our community—to get the word out. The Scottish Government is being proactive in showing leadership in driving benefit take-up and increasing automation, but we all have a role to play. On 14 November, which is coming very soon, when the Scottish child payment is extended to under-16s and goes up to £25 a week, I want to see every single MSP taking responsibility to amplify that in their communities. That is what working together is all about, that is what making a

difference is all about, and that is what this Government is absolutely focused on.

In closing the debate, I ask members to support the motion in my name.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on progress on the automation and take-up of Scottish social security benefits.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-06572.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-06572, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on progress on the automation and take-up of Scottish social security benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-06572.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on amendment S6M-06572.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, is: For 28, Against 83, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-06572.2, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-06572, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on progress on the automation and take-up of Scottish social security benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my app connected, but I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote was recorded, Ms Mochan.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)

(SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on amendment S6M-06572.2, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, is: For 48, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-06572, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on progress on the automation and take-up of Scottish social security benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the system; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)
 (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 (Con)

Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-06572, in the name of Ben Macpherson, is: For 65, Against 46, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the positive impact that existing automation of Scottish social security payments is having, including ensuring that most eligible people receive the Child Winter Heating Assistance and Carer's Allowance Supplement without needing to apply; further welcomes the proposal to automate the Best Start Grant Early Learning Payment and Best Start Grant School Age Payment for eligible families in receipt of Scottish Child Payment by the end of November 2022; notes the Scottish Government's intention to continue exploring opportunities for further automation; believes that these changes will mean that more people get the benefits that they are entitled to, which is especially important at a time of increasing economic uncertainty; recognises the progress made in promoting Scottish benefit take-up since the publication of the second benefit take-up strategy in 2021, including the launch of an independent advocacy service and funding welfare rights advisors in up to 180 GP practices in Scotland's most deprived areas, as well as remote and rural areas; acknowledges that there is still work to do regarding both automation and take-up, and agrees, therefore, that all governments should ensure that people are aware of, and enabled to access, the financial support that they are eligible for and entitled to.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We will move to members' business after a brief pause.

Allied Health Professions Day 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate, in the name of Carol Mochan, on allied health professions day 2022—helping people live their best lives. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that Allied Health Professions Day 2022 will be marked on 14 October; recognises what it sees as the important contribution that Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) make to the provision of health and social care in Scotland; understands that AHPs make up the third largest workforce in the NHS; commends these health professionals for their dedication at all times but particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic; understands that AHPs play an integral role in prehabilitation, early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation strategies to meet the needs of the South Scotland and wider Scottish population, and notes the view that further resource for AHPs is needed to fulfil their potential and meet the need for collaboration and diversity of skills in health and social care.

17:13

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is an honour to have secured the debate. Members will know that it was moved—it was supposed to be held on an evening when we were instead in the chamber voting. I believe that the allied health professionals who are with us—there were many more on that previous evening—had a successful event in the Parliament. They tell me that it was networking, but I have heard that a bit of a party went on as well. However, it is lovely to see them in the chamber.

The debate presents an opportunity to celebrate the work of allied health professions in Scotland, recognise their contribution and highlight the challenges and difficulties that they face as the third-largest workforce in Scotland's health service. I say hello not only to the people in the gallery but to those who are watching on Scottish Parliament television. Many of them were not able to come through for a second time, but I am assured that a number of AHPs are watching us. Those in the gallery have come, I am sure, not just to hear words and soundbites about how much they are valued but to go away knowing that the Parliament and the Government will take action to show how much they are valued.

AHPs are a diverse group of 14 professions, and I ask members to visit them whenever they can. Allied health professions day was on October 14, so we have missed the date, but there are still opportunities for members to visit AHPs around their constituencies and regions and I am sure that they will be welcome.

I also thank members from every party in the Parliament who supported the motion, which allows us to debate it. That support further highlights the recognition that AHPs deserve and confirms that there is an interest in the Parliament in debating the ways in which AHPs have improved the lives of, and provide support to, people in the community. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I thank our allied health professionals for the work that they do every day across the health and social care service and networks. I hope that they realise that we are pleased to have them with us today.

Allied health professions day is about helping people live their best lives. Like other health service workers, AHPs continued their work throughout the pandemic because, although buildings were closed and, in some ways, lives were put on hold, the difficulties facing many of the Scottish population remained and it was incumbent on AHPs and other health professionals to continue to deliver services against the backdrop of a pandemic that was taking lives in every community. We thank them for that continued work through those difficult times. They deserve huge credit and I am pleased to be able to put that on the record in the Parliament.

Some members in the chamber know that I started my working life with a career in dietetics, which is one of the allied health professions. It is not an exaggeration to say that it set me up for a life in politics like no other career would have done. I did the job for nearly 20 years and met many lifelong friends, patients and service users who shaped my life and belief system.

My friend Michelle was at the event in the Parliament. She is not in the gallery today but I know that she is watching. We met in the matriculation queue at Queen's College, Glasgow. I am absolutely sure that she does not want me to divulge how many years ago that was.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Go on! [Laughter.]

Carol Mochan: At that time, the professions were in different areas depending on whether you were a physiotherapist, dietician or occupational therapist—those are some of the many allied health professions. Students were well supported—I know some of the students who are coming through, and it seems that they still are—and we were always thankful for the support from the colleges that trained the professions.

Throughout my career, I met patients who needed assessment and treatment. They showed me kindness and strength of character when, often, they faced life-changing illnesses. I describe it as the best job ever because I was lucky enough

to go into a field that was about society's role in maximising the best life possible.

In my job with learning disability services, we worked across communities, as many AHPs do. That nicely leads me to discuss some of the diverse services that AHPs provide and the overall aim of that work.

The umbrella term "wellbeing" can have many meanings depending on who we speak to and what wellbeing means to us. For AHPs, wellbeing is, as mentioned in the debate title, helping people live their best lives ever. Everyone will have a different view of what their best life is, with different end goals, targets and means of reaching those targets, but the first-class assessments, treatments, specialised groups and community work of AHPs in Scotland help them to get there. When members visit local AHP services, they will be greatly impressed with the diverse work and working styles of that group of healthcare professionals.

My long-standing view is that health provision delivers best when it is local and on the doorstep of the people who are most in need, and when services go to people rather than waiting on people coming to them. In a world of digital communication and over-the-phone appointments, it is important that we maintain strong connections with our communities. Using the expertise and work of our AHPs allows services to do just that.

As mentioned in the motion, prehabilitation, early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation are four key areas in which allied health professions play a significant role in the development of strategy and the delivery of services to meet the needs of all Scotland's population. In local health centres and community hubs, schools and local third sector organisations and beyond, allied health professionals need resources to provide that service and allow people to live the best life possible.

In towns and communities that we know are suffering due to the impacts of the cost of living crisis, that have been impacted by the austerity agenda from the Tories at Westminster and, as we cannot forget, where there are impacts of cuts to local councils and services, the work of AHPs is most impactful.

Although we have come to the chamber to commend the work of our AHPs and the contribution that they make to health and social care provision as the third-largest workforce in our health service, I cannot make my remarks in good conscience without calling out the actions of the Governments here and at Westminster. I know that the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport would expect no less of me.

Early intervention is key across many services. It is key in speech and language therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and beyond, where there have been significant failings at a national Government level, putting considerable pressure on the ability of AHPs to deliver those vital services. Therefore, it is important that we hear from the minister how the Scottish Government will deliver clear plans for supporting AHPs in the workforce, focusing on prehabilitation, early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation.

AHPs are in the gallery not just for warm words but to hear clear plans for action on investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up, Ms Mochan.

Carol Mochan: No problem at all, Presiding Officer.

It is right that we thank AHPs again. I also thank members for joining me in the debate.

17:21

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate the member on securing the debate, which focuses on the people whom one might term the unsung of the health service. Indeed, I suspect that, if members were to mention to someone at the bus stop that they were speaking in a debate applauding the contribution of allied health professionals, many would find that that person did not know who they were talking about. However, the term covers a vital range of professionals that most of us have dealings with over the years.

The allied health professions cover a wide range of expertise. For example, they include art, drama and music therapists. Those therapies help mental and physical wellbeing. There are also the more well-known AHPs: physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists. The allied health professions also include therapeutic and diagnostic radiographers, podiatrists and paramedics. That list is not exhaustive. Their professionalism extends beyond medical interventions and often includes tender loving care, good words, kindness and listening to the anxieties of their patients.

AHPs are essential to the wellbeing of my constituents and, indeed, to my own wellbeing. I have had to use the professional services of a physio on more than one occasion and can tell members that I am thankful for that. Similarly, I saw a podiatrist who was taking referrals during Covid. I have decided since then to take much better care of my feet. They are more important to me than I ever knew.

The intervention of those health professionals cured me of pain and increased my mobility, as such intervention does for many others. That, of course, has a big impact on general health and mental wellbeing. Therefore, it also saves pressure on our general practitioners, the national health service and our hospitals. There is no doubt that, as the population ages—and I know what I am talking about—we will need more therapists, particularly physios.

I turn to the work of paramedics in our ambulance service. They provide specialist care and treatment to patients who have been involved in accidents, emergencies and other crises. They need to be able to make swift decisions, stay calm and calm their patients. They often arrive before a GP and ensure that patients are stabilised and en route to hospital without delay. I will give two examples.

A few years back, I was out with the Borders police on patrol in the wee small hours over Saturday night into Sunday morning. We received a call-out and blue-lighted to a Borders town where a poor woman had thrown herself from a bridge into the river below. The river was low, so she fell on to rocks. I watched the police, fire and rescue and paramedics in synchronised action without a word having to be exchanged. Each played their part in the rescue. The police had sealed off the road and fire and rescue had lowered equipment to river level to raise her up. Paramedics were already there. They had descended, wrapped the woman in foil and placed her on a stretcher.

The second event was when, in the course of my profession as a solicitor, I had the tragic case of a woman who tried to cross a railway line. She nearly managed to haul herself on to the platform, but fell back and was hit by a train, trapping her underneath. The driver was about to move the train, but was stopped by the paramedics, as the wheels were acting as a tourniquet on her legs, and moving the train would have made her bleed to death. The paramedics crawled underneath the train, covered in hot engine oil. They comforted her and took early medical interventions, which saved her life.

Not all call-outs are so awful, but many involve road traffic accidents. Like the other services in attendance that I have mentioned, the police and fire and rescue might need cutting equipment. They face sights that must and do impact on them.

In conclusion, I thank Carol Mochan for bringing forward this debate, and I thank all who work as allied health professionals. I hope that everyone who is listening to this now realises exactly what allied health professionals are.

17:26

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank Carol Mochan for securing parliamentary time to mark allied health professions day 2022 after the debate was delayed last month. It is great to see people in the gallery today. I hope that my colleague Ms Mochan will get them hot cups of tea for braving the weather to get here.

This is an opportunity for MSPs to not just thank allied health professionals for the work that they do and their commitment, compassion and dedication during the pandemic but to reflect on the contribution that AHPs can make to the delivery of healthcare and public health more generally.

AHPs make up the third-largest workforce in NHS Scotland—it employs just under 13,000 AHPs. Their impact on their patients' health and wellbeing cannot be overstated. A multidisciplinary team that spans a range of allied professions can have a huge bearing on the quality of life of the new mother who needs postnatal physiotherapy following the birth of her baby, the victim of a car accident who needs a prosthetic leg and lifelong care, the young child who is struggling to talk and would benefit from the intervention of a speech therapist, and the sufferers of neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease.

As a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, I feel qualified to say that there are, unfortunately, high vacancy rates in the allied health professions. The vacancy rate has almost doubled in the space of four years, from 4.4 per cent in March 2018 to 8.2 per cent in March 2022. The number of vacant AHP posts has increased by 43 per cent in a single year. The new mother who needs a physiotherapist to help her postpartum recovery has to wait weeks to be seen.

In NHS Grampian, the wait for routine pelvic dysfunction physiotherapy is around 24 weeks. Many women seek private treatment because NHS waiting lists are simply too long. As we seek to address the gender-related health gap, that risks further entrenching inequalities.

I have challenged the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care many times on the Scottish National Party's plans for NHS recruitment and retention. NHS workforce planning is a massive issue that the SNP has managed to get spectacularly wrong.

We know that the coming months are expected to be extremely challenging for Scotland's NHS. The Scottish Conservatives believe that we would utilise AHPs to their maximum potential in workforce planning. The diverse skills and expertise of the allied health professions can add a huge amount of value to primary and secondary

care, but we need to ensure that supply is commensurate with demand and that the NHS is able to keep the AHPs who come through the pipeline.

Against the background of potential strike action by NHS staff over the coming months, it is especially important to understand the pressure that they are working under. They are tired and overstretched, and their voices must be heard.

17:29

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank Carol Mochan for bringing the debate to mark allied health professions day to the chamber. It is, sadly, slightly delayed but nonetheless highlights the vital role that our allied health professionals play in health, social care, education and the voluntary sector, their tireless commitment during the Covid-19 pandemic and the positive impact that they have on peoples' lives—I think of my experience of the compassionate response of occupational therapists to my elderly father after he fell through a glass door and ended up completely losing his confidence, and I remember the radiographers who x-rayed my son's broken arm, on three occasions, at the Royal Aberdeen children's hospital and the physiotherapists who patiently supported my brother-in-law as he learned to walk again after a life-threatening stroke.

We know that people are emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic with increasingly complex health needs. The rehabilitation framework and the once-for-Scotland approach recognise the demand that is associated with pre-existing long-term health conditions and the needs of people living with those long-term effects of Covid-19. It is also important to acknowledge other pressures such as staffing and recruitment challenges, our ageing population, climate change and, of course, the health inequalities that were starkly brought into focus by the recent University of Glasgow report linking austerity measures with excess deaths in Great Britain. However, today is about recognition and appreciation of the contribution that is made by a skilled, experienced and committed allied healthcare workforce.

I welcome the additional funding for psychological therapies and interventions, the launch of the national conversation to improve support for people with dementia and their carers and this week's announcement of £37 million of Scottish Government funding over the next four years to help future-proof our NHS against rising demand.

There is no doubt that we are experiencing radical changes in the delivery of healthcare, which mean that the knowledge and skills that are

required by allied health professionals have changed, too. I will cite an example of a small-scale but innovative approach that supports students in their practice-based learning.

The school of health sciences at Robert Gordon University has been leading a contemporary, community-based education opportunity that brings tangible benefit to older people in the most deprived areas in my constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine. The Thursday physio drop-in is a weekly, student led physiotherapy clinic, comprising an over-55s exercise class along with advice on mobility, posture and strength, all followed by a cup of tea in a familiar setting within walking distance of people's homes.

Building on that, a new student-led law clinic, recently launched in a busy GP practice in my constituency, will offer law students the opportunity to gain experience through providing free legal advice to people on low incomes. Barriers to health and wellbeing are complex: housing, finance and negotiating consumer rights are all barriers to the basic requirements of a healthy life—our best life. A first in Scotland, the community law clinic connects justice and allied healthcare to tackle the root causes of issues that contribute to poor mental and physical health, which is particularly relevant during the on-going cost of living crisis. I commend Hannah Moneagle from Robert Gordon University, Dr Adrian Crofton, lead clinician at the Torry medical practice, and all those involved in establishing that truly multidisciplinary project.

I commend all our allied health professionals for their commitment and resilience and for their contribution to making life better for us all, and again thank Carol Mochan for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

17:34

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank my colleague Carol Mochan for lodging the motion to celebrate allied health professions day 2022, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Carol normally replies to members' business debates for our health team, so I am delighted that she is leading one such debate today.

Allied health professionals include people from 14 different professions. Christine Grahame outlined almost all of them, including physiotherapists, radiographers, podiatrists and dieticians, all of whom help us to live better and healthier lives. The work that they do ensures that our approach to health and social care is holistic and based on prevention.

In many of our areas, there are also community link workers, who work with physiotherapists in the

main and help people to improve their social, emotional and physical wellbeing through prescribing a daily practice of exercise to develop a healthier lifestyle. However, those key posts at community level might now be under threat, because the Government has just stripped £65 million out of the primary care improvement fund, some of which paid for those posts. It would be helpful if the minister would clarify in closing that there are no plans in place for those much-needed additional staff to be cancelled as a result.

In our hospitals, for those who are unfortunate enough to have succumbed to ill health or to have suffered an accident, it is the allied health professionals working in radiology who perform the scan to help to diagnose the disease or injury. It is the allied health professionals who work in prosthetics who do life-changing work in developing and providing artificial limbs to patients who previously thought that they would not be able to walk again. For people suffering with daily pain or discomfort in their feet from conditions such as arthritis, it is the allied health professionals working in orthotic services who can help people to improve their quality of life.

In every aspect of our health and social care system, allied health professionals are central to its delivery. However, there are record numbers of vacancies in our NHS, with profound consequences for patient care and safety. More than 1,150 of them are in allied health roles. Concerns have been raised around the number of physiotherapists in Scotland, and physiotherapy is the area with the largest number of vacancies among the allied health professions. Statistics show that, although university programme numbers in England have risen by 83 per cent, the increase in Scotland is only 4 per cent. There is a similar story with a lack of radiographers. The Government really must do better at workforce planning or we will store up problems for the future.

The problems are not just in recruitment. I hope that members will forgive my being parochial. In my constituency, the Vale of Leven hospital physiotherapy service has had to share its location with the minor injuries unit as a result of Covid. Staff were happy to do that, but they are now being relocated to another part of the hospital, which is unsuitable. Consequently, they are only able to see fewer patients than before, and the service suffers. The Government must prioritise the remobilisation of rehabilitation services, especially in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

It is vital that we do more to not only attract people to AHP roles but retain them, with decent working conditions that allow them to do their job. Given the pressures that the NHS will face over the coming winter, the work that AHPs do around

early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation strategies should be at the forefront of our recovery plans, with full support and fair wages given to staff.

I pay tribute to all the allied health professionals who work tirelessly in health and social care across Scotland. We must support and value them as we work towards our shared objective of helping people to live healthier and better lives.

17:38

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank Carol Mochan. I am delighted that we were able to reschedule the debate so that we can celebrate allied health professionals. From what I saw, it was definitely a party last time, and I hope that AHPs will all be partying again tonight.

When we think of our NHS, it is usually images of doctors and nurses that spring to mind, but the 14 allied health professions make up the third largest group of healthcare workers in the NHS. Other members, including Christine Grahame, have identified those professions. Allied health professionals play a vital role in the delivery of health and social care services to people across Scotland. They are rightly valued by professionals, patients and families alike.

We have watched our healthcare professionals go above and beyond the call of duty over the past few years. They have adapted not just their practice but, sometimes, their whole lives, and they have shown a selfless determination to provide essential care to others. That includes our allied health professionals, and many of us are forever grateful. Allied health professionals often help to reduce or remove the need for medical interventions, which helps to drive service improvement and sustainability across community and acute sectors, and they are set to play a vital role as we build a national care service that is fit for Scotland's people.

I will give a couple of local stories. In South Lanarkshire, the autism resource co-ordination hub supports autistic families, including my own. I remember quite a few parent-carer sessions with a range of AHPs that were organised through the ARCH. The one that stands out most in my memory was a visit from an occupational therapist. She set out some tasks that were designed to give parents a flavour of how autistic kids experience the world. For the first exercise, all the parents were given a set of boxing gloves and were instructed to open a packet of crisps. Trust me, it is not easy; it is almost impossible.

Next, we were handed a set of binoculars and were told to hold them back to front so that everything looked really wee. We then had to try to

step inside some empty boxes. To be honest, it was hilarious, and I will never forget the feeling of waving my foot around as I tried to land it inside a large box, with my proprioception thrown right off kilter. The tasks were simple but really effective. I was able to experience my child's challenges for myself, and I am still grateful to that OT for giving me a little window into his world. The experience inspired patience when my child struggled with tasks that others perceived as being really easy, and it made me a better parent.

The ARCH works closely with a couple of NHS Lanarkshire allied health professionals who are trained as specialist autism advisers. They deliver a range of workshops that focus on sensory issues and life skills such as eating, washing and dressing, and they offer lots of practical strategies that empower autistic people to go out there and live their best lives as independently as possible. Those AHPs are often described by colleagues as superstars, and Ramon Hutchinson, the project co-ordinator, talks enthusiastically about their passion, curiosity and empathy as they work with families to understand and support them through the challenges that neurodivergence brings.

A second organisation in my constituency, Enable Scotland, places huge value on its work with allied health professionals. It highlights their skilled approach and input to multidisciplinary teams as they support individuals with complex needs. I am told that their focus on achieving the outcomes that really matter to individuals is always key, from supported self-management to rehabilitation and therapeutic services.

Enable Care told me the story of a young Lanarkshire man who spent several years in hospital before eventually securing a home in the community where he could live, with support. That was far from a simple task—it was fraught with complexities and difficulties, and it took a long time—but the team's determination made it happen. The support of AHPs was critical in the young man getting his life back. That just could not have happened without them.

It is only fair that we celebrate and showcase the contributions that our AHPs make to individuals and our society, so I say to all our AHPs: we see you, and we thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Mackay, who joins us remotely.

17:43

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Carol Mochan for securing this evening's debate and all the allied health professionals in the gallery and across the country. The debate gives us an important space to discuss the valuable

work of allied health professionals the length and breadth of Scotland.

As we have heard, allied health professionals are a wide and varied collection of professionals, including speech and language therapists, diagnostic radiographers, art therapists, podiatrists and many others. Those professionals play a vital role in supporting and improving patients' wellbeing in health settings and across our communities.

I thank Movement for Health for its work in highlighting the great work that is done by allied health professionals on a range of issues. Among its policy asks, it highlights the importance of social prescribing, which is an issue that I have raised many times in the chamber and at the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. Although we all recognise the importance of our physical health, the importance of wellbeing is becoming an increasingly familiar part of the dialogue during discussions on health.

AHPs have the potential to support a wider transition towards more preventative health interventions. For many, they provide vital support without which some people might have had their health issues deteriorate.

Social prescribing can allow for more individually orientated healthcare provision. Such an approach puts the individual at the heart of decision making and outcomes, rather than focusing on pre-prescribed or generic outcomes. Without such talented allied health professionals, who are trained across so many various sectors of healthcare, policy initiatives such as social prescribing would surely not be possible.

In Lanarkshire, in my Central Scotland region, there is a well-established social prescribing programme that has been shown to help people by improving self-confidence and self-esteem, reducing low mood and feelings of stress and helping people to develop positive ways of coping with the challenges of life, among its other benefits. We must view the relationship between health and wellbeing in that way, with both being necessary, and where helping one improves the other.

I thank Movement for Health for highlighting some of the issues that were raised in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's "Tackling health inequalities in Scotland" report. As the report notes, community link workers are one of the services that link the wider array of allied health professionals with those in the community. One of the report's recommendations was to further embed community link workers across GP practices in Scotland. Community link workers have the potential to further support health and wellbeing, and allied health professionals, to

address poor health outcomes in areas of deprivation in particular by tying in the expertise of a wide range of social, mental health and physical health care providers, including AHPs, and being able to advise patients on financial and social security issues.

As we have heard, allied health professionals make up the third largest workforce in the NHS. Much like other sectors in the NHS, appropriate resourcing is essential to the delivery of good health and social care. Brexit has been a significant driver of recruitment issues in our NHS, and I am sure that many colleagues across the chamber will share my alarm at the announcement of £18 billion-worth of public sector spending cuts. The knock-on effect that those cuts would have on Scotland's public sector could be really damaging.

As parliamentarians, we have to acknowledge those real and prevalent challenges, especially given the cost of living crisis and the impacts of the Covid pandemic. We must ensure that allied health professionals do not simply hear our warm thanks but get our support in their delivery of crucial health and social care benefits, and that they are not left behind in those circumstances.

17:47

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Carol Mochan on securing the debate. As we heard from Tess White and others, AHPs encompass a range of health professions and make up the third largest workforce in NHS Scotland. I, too, welcome to the gallery those who have come to their Parliament this evening—it is great that they are here.

AHPs include dieticians, occupational therapists, orthoptists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and many others that members have already named. Carol Mochan may notice that I mentioned dieticians first; I learned so much about insulin and carbohydrate ratios, and counting carbs to help manage my type 1 diabetes, from a fab dietician, whom I thank.

The breadth of AHPs' skills and their reach across the age continuum, the third sector, communities and health and care settings make them ideally placed to be leaders in the public health environment. Their expertise is used to support prevention and self-management and promote wellbeing, and it is right that we celebrate their contribution to the health of people in Scotland as well as to the prevention agenda and our NHS.

Even before the Covid pandemic, Scotland, like the rest of the UK, was facing a number of significant public health challenges as a result of its changing demographics. Those changes are driven by improvements in life expectancy, as

people are living longer; alongside that, people are having fewer children or are having children later in life. In addition, younger people are moving away from remote and rural areas, such as my South Scotland region, towards towns and cities. We know that that brings both opportunities and challenges for the delivery of public services and for society at national and local level. Those challenges have broadened the need for AHPs to ensure that people are being seen by the most appropriate skilled professional.

AHPs act as a catalyst by championing prevention and beneficial lifestyle changes to improve health and wellbeing, thus maximising an individual's potential to live a full and active life so that they can thrive. AHPs can significantly improve productivity, quality and effectiveness by working in collaboration with their medical, nursing and social care colleagues. Complex problems require teamwork within the multidisciplinary team, and I know from my former NHS colleagues, and directly from my working life in my previous NHS clinical role, that AHPs support patient flow throughout the health system.

AHPs are experts in assessment and rehab, and their expertise brings different ideas and a different perspective to the delivery of services. The role of AHPs is integral to many clinical pathways, but there is always a huge opportunity to increase and better utilise our AHPs, for example by including them in NHS leadership roles.

Carol Mochan is right to ask members to visit local allied health professionals. Just last week, I visited Specsavers in Dumfries, where I met the company's director of NHS services, Stephen McAndrew, and the director of Specsavers Dumfries, Elaine Campbell. I was totally impressed by how Specsavers has worked with the Scottish Government, particularly over the pandemic, to ensure that patient needs have been met. We discussed glaucoma, visual impairment, vision loss and the excellent knowledge and skills of the team in Dumfries. Specsavers and other optometrists have a demonstrated track record of improving eye health and dealing with eye problems, so that people avoid a hospital visit or admission.

I also heard how Specsavers is moving into doing more audiology work. I would welcome an update from the minister on the Scottish Government's work to support and enable the provision of audiology services in primary care and to ensure that everyone has access to audiology services, as we know that good hearing health can contribute to productivity and to people staying in the workplace for longer and having a better quality of life.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to raising public awareness of the work of AHPs, including through the "Scottish Allied Health Professions Public Health Strategic Framework Implementation Plan", but given how much pressure our NHS is currently under, I ask whether the minister has plans to increase the awareness-raising efforts, in order to ensure that people are seen by the most appropriate professionals and to prevent secondary admissions to hospital.

Allied health professionals do a fantastic job every day, and I thank them all for what they do. I agree that we need to increase awareness of the invaluable role of AHPs and of the contribution that they make.

17:51

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government, and I thank Carol Mochan for lodging her motion.

When, after many hours of sitting in this chamber, I arrived at the reception for allied health professionals that Carol Mochan mentioned, it was in full swing, and I was reminded, as I have been many times in my professional life, of just how can-do allied health professionals are. They did not wait for the politicians—they just cracked on and got on with it.

I am acutely aware that, when some people think of our health service, they think of ambulances, operating theatres, accidents and emergencies, but today's debate has shown the extensive nature of the multidisciplinary roles that are played by the third-largest healthcare workforce—our allied health professional community. From physiotherapists to art therapists and from radiography to podiatry, across health, social care, housing, education, prisons and more, it is our 14 unique allied health professions that are so often at the forefront of delivering healthcare in this country. I want to thank each and every one of our AHPs for the invaluable role that they play in our society.

Over the past two years, the world has faced a once-in-a-century event, which has been one of the biggest crises that our health service and our society have ever faced. The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on the AHP family but, day after day, AHPs found innovative new ways of working. They are can-do, and I was awed by the way in which they rose to the challenge. This country and its people owe all AHPs a debt that cannot be repaid. As we continue along our road to recovery, we will continue to rely on the AHP community to see us through.

It is now more important than ever that we take an explicit public health focus in considering how we prioritise the delivery of health and social care. The breadth of services that AHPs provide in communities, schools and health settings, with their focus on early intervention, prevention and wellbeing, makes them ideally placed to continue to build on good practice in public health. That is why the Scottish Government supported the development of a united and collective approach to public health for AHPs, which is set out in the "Scottish Allied Health Professions Public Health Strategic Framework Implementation Plan". The implementation plan signals a key milestone in expanding the role of AHPs in promoting public health in Scotland, along with the goals and actions that are needed to realise the vision.

The overall ambition for the role of allied health professionals in public health has been set through collaborative work across the four nations. The development of the "UK Allied Health Professions Public Health Strategic Framework" has been important in ensuring that the ambition and goals of the UK strategic framework are relevant in Scotland's unique context. A national oversight group, which is currently being established, will build momentum and monitor progress as we implement the strategy at local level.

The Scottish Government recognises the need to recruit and train the next generation of the allied health professions. The Government believes in the power of education, and we want anyone who has an interest in delivering healthcare to see a viable path to professional registration and on-going career development.

To achieve that, we are investing in a difference-making bursary—worth £10,000 per year—for paramedic science students; all undergraduate AHP students have a guarantee of free tuition fees; and we have made a commitment to increase reporting radiography training places by 30 from 2020 to 2023, as part of our integrated workforce plans. To date, 35 students have been funded to complete the training and, in addition, funding was made available to train 12 assistant radiographers.

Through a funded scheme to increase the number of graduating physiotherapists working in the NHS, we have also committed a total of £4.5 million to increase the number of musculoskeletal physiotherapists working in primary care. Thirty-seven students are due to complete their training in December 2023, and a further 53 students are due to complete training in December 2024.

In addition, our funding of the type 2 diabetes prevention framework has enabled the expansion of the dietetic workforce in Scotland and increased patient access to expert dietetic care. With NHS Education Scotland, we are investigating the need

for dieticians to work in new roles in primary care settings, such as GP practices, to deliver more prevention, early detection and early intervention work as part of the multidisciplinary team.

We have produced a once-for-Scotland rehabilitation approach, which was published in June 2022. It is based on the six principles of good rehabilitation, and it addresses the challenges of individuals who are emerging from the pandemic with increasingly complex physical and mental health needs that require rehabilitation. The approach has been developed with NHS health boards, health and social care partners, and third and independent sectors, and it recognises the crucial role that allied health professionals play in rehabilitation.

Finally, I will mention an investment that I am really delighted with. Over the next three years, we are investing in a new programme of work to support early intervention, so that our speech and language therapists can work with children and their families and help to build confidence and capacity for staff who work in early learning and childcare settings. That work will join up efforts across other key public services, such as health visiting.

Colleagues around the chamber have highlighted unique examples of how AHPs continue to shape the delivery of healthcare across the country, but what does the future hold for those professions? How can we ensure that the current approach is consistent with the needs of the people of Scotland—now and in the years to come?

To address those questions, the Government is carrying out a review—led by Scotland's chief AHP officer, Carolyn McDonald—of allied health profession education and the workforce. Leaders across the profession are working collaboratively and, at the centre of the review, are offering their guidance by chairing important workstreams or dedicating their time and expertise as members of the wider oversight group. The scope of the review is unashamedly wide-ranging; it is looking at the whole system, and everything—from recruitment to advancing practice to educational delivery models—is being considered. We are doing that in partnership with the AHP community, because its continued participation and leadership in that space is vital to the review's success.

I thank all the members who have participated in the debate and shared their stories of this inspiring group of professionals. Today, we have helped to shine the spotlight on those important roles. Occupational therapists might never have their own BBC drama—although perhaps my OT pals will tell me something different—and dieticians might not get a running commentary on the evening news, but each of those unique 14

professions should be celebrated for their continuing commitment to their vocation and for the care and support that they provide every day in our communities. Whether it is the physio who helps a patient to find their feet after a catastrophic injury or the art therapist who provides a means of expression for those in the justice system, they so often work in areas in which we would never think to look.

I hope that what we have said today demonstrates the regard in which this Government holds our AHP family.

Meeting closed at 18:00.

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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