



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 5 September 2023

Session 6



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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 5 September 2023

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Alasdair Bennett, who is the chief executive of Bethany Christian Trust.

Alasdair Bennett (Bethany Christian Trust):

Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the invitation to address you as you begin this new term.

At the national prayer breakfast in June, I joined MSPs from across political parties. Together, we prayed for our nation.

In 1983, in Leith in Edinburgh, prayer was the catalyst that launched Bethany Christian Trust. For 40 years, our staff and volunteers have sought to love, serve and value people on the margins, labouring together with many partners in our vision of ending homelessness. We welcome the Scottish Parliament's commitment to addressing homelessness, which is a major social issue requiring a holistic approach.

Through more than 30 services across Scotland, Bethany works to prevent homelessness, intervene in crisis and support people in their own homes. Through Christ's love in action, we have seen countless lives and circumstances changed, yet our work is far from over.

What makes change possible? There was a young man called Scott, who also grew up near Leith. He was struggling. He fell into a bad rut and lost his way. He left the family home and ended up making some big mistakes and damaging his mind through a cocktail of substance abuse. He had no money, no work and no motivation. By the age of 19, a deep depression had taken hold of him and vice-like paranoia gripped his mind.

Scott needed change. There was someone praying for him: his mother. She prayed fervently, nightly, month after month, eventually exclaiming, "Lord, I surrender what happens to him, as long as he's Yours." God answered.

That young man found forgiveness, healing and hope. His life was turned around, his heart was lifted and his mind was healed. Why? Because one woman believed in the good news of Jesus

Christ to change lives, and she surrendered to God in prayer.

My middle name is Scott, and that young man was me, just over 30 years ago. Change is possible.

What about a nation? Can a nation be changed? Jesus Christ taught that change is not only possible but necessary, declaring, "The kingdom of God has come near. Turn around and believe the good news!"

We all have a part to play in transforming society through our prayers, attitudes and actions. What could it mean for us today, if we collectively heed Jesus's invitation to turn around, trust in his unconditional love and surrender to God in prayer? Truly, it could transform the nation.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-10339, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 5 September 2023—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: Programme for Government 2023-24

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government 2023-24

(b) Wednesday 6 September 2023—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Equality within the 2023-24 Programme for Government

(c) Thursday 7 September 2023—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Motion of Condolence for Winnie Ewing

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on Professor Eljamel, NHS Tayside

followed by Ministerial Statement: Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Opportunity within the 2023-24 Programme for Government

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.45 pm Decision Time—*[George Adam]*

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Short-term Let Licensing Scheme (Applications)

1. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what percentage of short-term let operators have applied to be licensed in advance of the deadline for applications under the licensing scheme of 1 October. (S6T-01495)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The short-term let sector has grown significantly during the past decade and has changed in nature, bringing economic benefits but also causing concerns about consistency of quality and the impact on local communities.

Following two public consultations and independent research, Parliament passed licensing legislation in January 2022. All existing hosts have had 20 months in which to apply, and they must apply before 1 October in order to be able to continue trading.

According to local authorities' public registers, 6,323 applications had been received as of 31 August and just over half of applicants had been issued with a licence, with none—none—having been refused. I will be writing to all members during the next few days to explain how they can encourage and support operators to submit applications.

Murdo Fraser: Operators of self-catering properties are rallying outside this Parliament today to highlight their concerns about the unintended consequences of the legislation. The Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers estimates that almost two thirds of those currently operating could give up their businesses as a result of the legislation, which would have a devastating impact on our tourism sector. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the financial cost and of the jobs that will be lost as a result of this policy?

Paul McLennan: I have been negotiating and working with the sector for a number of months. I met with the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers on my first day as a minister; indeed, I have done so three times since March. I have also spoken to the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland, which is the licensing body for local authorities.

Costs will vary depending on the size of the building and on what providers need to do, but a business and regulatory impact assessment suggested that costs will average between £250

and £450. That will vary, depending on the size of the property and the details required.

Murdo Fraser: There was no answer there about the number of jobs that might be lost or the cost to the economy. The legislation affects not only stand-alone self-catering units in city centres; it affects traditional bed and breakfasts, guest houses, home shares, house swaps and farm cottages, many of which have been operating successfully for years and provide an excellent service to visitors with no negative issues, but now face substantial additional bureaucracy and cost.

In a few minutes, we will hear from the First Minister, who will apparently tell us that he wants a better relationship with business. If this policy is not delayed to allow a proper review of the economic impact on our vital tourism sector, will the First Minister's words be exposed as no more than empty rhetoric?

Paul McLennan: This Government listened to the sector, which is why there was a six-month delay. Any legislation must be balanced and licensing is always about safeguarding the quality and consistency of a sector. There were three public consultations before the Scottish Parliament passed the legislation in January 2022. The sector has brought economic benefits, but the consultation also raised concerns about the consistency of quality and the impact on neighbourhoods. The licensing scheme addresses those concerns.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Does the minister agree that 22 months' notice, six months of which were a well-publicised extension in response to requests by operators, is more than enough time to prepare and submit an application, especially for the majority of short-term let hosts who already abide by high standards? Does he also agree that the Opposition should be encouraging operators to apply during the remaining time, instead of claiming that legislation passed by Parliament in January 2022 is being implemented too quickly?

Paul McLennan: I agree with what the member has rightly pointed out. Operators have had just under two years—two years—to ensure that they comply with the licensing conditions and I stress that they should already have been doing that under existing legislation. They have also had a year in which to prepare and submit their applications. The fact is that no one—no one—from among the thousands who have already applied has yet been refused a licence.

I have spoken to businesses and councils, and the messages I have heard are different from those being shared here today. What I have heard is that it is straightforward to apply for and obtain a licence and that councils are working with

applicants when the information given is incomplete. The responsible and balanced course of action is for everyone to encourage and support existing short-term let operators to apply for licences before the 1 October deadline. The key thing is that they have to apply before 1 October. The local authority then has 12 months to look at the application and give the operator their licence. Licence applications have to be granted by licensing authorities unless there are good reasons to refuse them.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I know the benefits that the holiday industry can bring to what are often fragile rural economies, but I also see the negative impacts of poorly-managed, high-turnover properties on many of the same communities. Can the minister say more about how regulation will offer reassurance to communities that are facing those negative impacts?

Paul McLennan: I thank the member for her question. This summer, I undertook a tour round lots of local authorities, and that same question was raised. I know from exchanges that we have had in recent years across all parties that members have heard from constituents who have been negatively affected by the significant growth of short-term lets and are worried about the inconsistency of quality and the impact on local communities. Independent research that was undertaken in 2019 identified those impacts in more detail and we acted, after public consultation, to regulate short-term lets in order to address the matter.

Licensing offers reassurance, providing protection and benefits for all—businesses, guests, neighbours and communities right across Scotland. It puts in place a formal framework with conditions that responsible businesses should already be functioning within.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister knows that I favour sensible controls and regulation. That is why I favour the control areas. However, he needs to listen to the strength of opposition to the licensing arrangements—it is really strong. At a time of great economic strain, the regulations are, I think, heavy handed, and they have also been the subject of mission creep. Why does the minister not understand the strength of feeling and reflect on that?

Paul McLennan: I have done so. As I have said, on my first day in this role, I engaged with the sector straight off. I have met it twice since then, and I have also met numerous local authorities to talk about the licensing scheme. SOLAR thinks that it is a proportionate response to what came through in the public consultation in 2019.

We will continue to listen to stakeholders as we go forward, but the scheme is a proportionate response to what came through in the 2019 consultation.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Public Buildings)

2. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many public buildings are currently at risk due to the exposure of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6T-01497)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Survey work is under way across the public sector. Where the presence of RAAC is confirmed in a public building, we expect the owner to take appropriate measures to manage any risk that is identified. We expect risk assessment of buildings with a confirmed RAAC presence and recommendations for mitigation to follow the current guidance published by the Institution of Structural Engineers.

Returns from councils confirm some presence in 37 schools. Councils have reassured ministers that, in the small number of schools where RAAC is present, appropriate mitigation plans are in place.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful for that response. I must thank Scottish Liberal Democrats for freedom of information requests that raised the issue as early as May this year. However, the matter is, apparently, something that the Governments north and south of the border have been aware of for a number of years.

Can the Scottish Government confirm that, when it is aware of the list of public buildings that are at risk, it will publish that list, keep it updated and ensure that steps are taken to ensure that buildings are still safe to open?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Of course, this is an issue that the Government has been aware of for some time, which is why action is being taken—and has been being taken for some time. For example, way back in July 2022, Scottish Government officials made contact with the Scottish heads of property services network and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to share information on RAAC. That work has been on-going for some time.

I completely appreciate why there is public concern on the issue—in particular, given the way that announcements have been handled down in England. However, I reassure Martin Whitfield that we appreciate that that public concern means that we need to be as open as we can possibly be on the matter. Parents and staff are concerned about it.

It is for councils to publish information on schools alongside having communication with parents and staff, because it is important that we reassure them, at both national and local levels, about the mitigations that are already taking place. I confirm that we intend to be as open as—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will now move back to Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the confirmation that the list will be published.

However, what support will follow from that for our local authorities in respect of the money that will be required to ensure that the surveys are undertaken properly, that the mitigation measures are correct and appropriate and, indeed, that they are supported, especially for certain buildings? I am thinking in particular of schools that have lost out because of the lack of publication of the learning estate investment programme.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned, it is for local authorities to publish that information on schools. They should do so to ensure that parents and staff are reassured. I again reassure Martin Whitfield that Jenny Gilruth, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and I are in regular contact with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that we offer support where it is needed, that we share good practice and information, and that we reaffirm the importance of looking at the professional advice that has come from the Institution of Structural Engineers. We will, of course, keep up that close contact with local authorities as the situation develops.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): In recognition that any repairs will result in additional spending commitments for the responsible bodies, what discussion has there been with the United Kingdom Government on capital funding to remediate situations in which the material is found in buildings?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In her letter of 3 September, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asked the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Education to clarify the public commitment by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to “spend what it takes” to make schools safe. That statement was welcomed, and early details are sought about the financial support package that would follow to devolved Governments. That follows an earlier letter, on 16 August, from the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, to His Majesty’s Treasury regarding further financial support to help to deal with the consequences of RAAC, to which we have yet to receive a reply. It is essential that we receive early clarity on the matter.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): In Preston Lodge high school in Prestonpans, 20 classrooms

are closed and secondary 1 pupils are being taught off-campus. East Lothian Council has already spent more than £300,000 to maintain education standards—a sum that has not been budgeted for at a time of extreme financial pressure for the council. Will the cabinet secretary therefore commit to reimbursing councils and health boards that have incurred significant non-construction and inspection-related costs due to the discovery of RAAC?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I refer Craig Hoy to the answer that I have just given. Clearly, the issue affects Administrations across the United Kingdom, so it is important that the UK Government and the chancellor take cognisance of that.

The cuts to our capital budgets make it difficult, across Government, to fulfil the obligations that we already have. We are, of course, committed to working with local authorities, but, frankly, there is an obligation on the UK Government also to step up and to ensure that everybody is supported on the issue.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It has now been months since I first brought the issue to the attention of the very top of the Scottish Government, but there is still no central register of affected buildings, no strategy for swift wholesale replacement of this potentially deadly concrete, and no national fund for cash-strapped schools, health boards and others that have been landed with it. Mitigation and monitoring offer little reassurance, given the collapse of a concrete beam that was marked as being safe, which prompted the closure of schools across England. Can the cabinet secretary say with confidence today that pupils, patients and staff do not have RAAC in the ceilings above them? Is it possible that that problem concrete is still in use in classrooms and wards right now?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest respect to Alex Cole-Hamilton, I note that it was not he who brought the issue before the eyes of the Scottish Government. We had been well aware of it for some time and already had plans in place, which is why discovery methods are in place right across Government and the public sector.

I urge Mr Cole-Hamilton to have some caution about what he is advising. I urge him to respect the advice of the Institution of Structural Engineers, which has not changed over the past week, despite what has been happening in England. Let us listen to that professional advice. Let us, of course, also pay close attention if the advice changes. However, it has not changed. Let us ensure that we listen to the professionals and the experts, and that we take action where it is needed. That is exactly why mitigation measures

are already in place where RAAC has been identified and measures have been required.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): In December 2021, the Government told the Parliament that it would publish in 2022 the schools that would form phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme. It failed to do so. In May, then in June, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said that there would be an announcement by the summer recess, but she failed to deliver that announcement. How many schools—such as Dumfries academy—are at risk due to RAAC, and how many schools' refurbishment or rebuild is being held up because of the failure of the Government to announce the funding that it promised to announce months ago?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest respect, I note that there are two different issues in that question. Yes—we are, of course, working very closely with councils where RAAC has been identified, as I said in my previous answers.

On the announcement of LEIP phase 3, I hope that everyone across the chamber recognises the very difficult circumstances that exist for all capital projects at the moment—in particular, because of increasing capital costs and construction costs and their implications. It is quite right that the Government takes longer than people would perhaps like us to take to ensure that we are getting the maximum out of that project and are looking at it very seriously. The cabinet secretary will make an announcement on that in due course, when they are ready to do so.

Programme for Government 2023-24

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf on the programme for government 2023-24. The First Minister's statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during the statement.

14:20

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I have often talked about my paternal grandfather, Muhammad Yousaf, over the past few months. I have commented on his journey from Pakistan to Pollokshields, where he first lived upon arrival in this country. What I have not spoken about is the difficult circumstances that followed shortly after he arrived here in Scotland, in a country where he could barely speak the language and had little to his name. Unfortunately, five years after arriving in Scotland, my grandmother, Muhammad Yousaf's wife, died at the age of 33, leaving my grandfather having to raise five children. He remarried but was left with five devastated children, including my father and my uncle, who was still a young baby.

My grandfather went on to become a successful small business owner, and although he has now passed away, his wife, my step-gran, still to this day works in the convenience store in Mayfield, and she tells me that Daniel Johnson is wont to pop in on occasion.

I mention my grandfather's story because there is no way that, all those decades ago, he could have supported his five children and been a successful small business owner if it had not been for the support of society and the state. At a time when he really needed it, the Government was there to support him financially. That in turn helped to unleash his entrepreneurial spirit, and over the decades he created jobs and contributed significantly to society, not least through the taxes that he paid.

There is no doubt in my mind that economic growth goes hand in hand with tackling poverty, as it did for my grandfather all those years ago. The programme for government that I am publishing today is unashamedly anti-poverty and pro-growth, and it has a focus on supporting women—who are disproportionately affected by the pressures of modern life—including through expanding our childcare offer.

When I became First Minister, I promised that I would lead a Government for the whole country. In this chamber, we must never forget that although we disagree—sometimes, quite rightly, passionately—there is far more that unites us than

divides us. Over the past two years, the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Green Party have successfully worked together to build a greener, fairer Scotland. In a world full of uncertainty, people rightly expect their elected representatives to work together constructively, and that is exactly what we have done.

So, to all the parties represented in this chamber, I repeat the offer that I made on becoming First Minister. You will sometimes disagree with things that we do, but, when you can, work with us. You will find that my door is always open. I have already shown my willingness to work with others in recent months.

However, we should remember the words of the late David McLetchie, who warned about

“worshipping the false god of consensus”.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; c 376.]

In that vein, the Government that I lead will not simply coalesce around the lowest common denominator. For the good of society, for our future and for our children, where we need to pick a side, we will. In particular, while other political parties are abdicating their responsibilities to tackle the climate emergency, we will be unapologetic in taking the action needed to ensure a sustainable future for our children and our planet.

This programme is an opportunity to be explicit about the driving mission of the Government. Let me make it abundantly clear: we are a Government that will maximise every single lever at our disposal to tackle the scourge of poverty in our country. We have adopted progressive tax and spending policies to face those challenges, and I will never shy away from the belief that those who earn the most should pay the most. However, let me be equally clear and say without equivocation that we also need to support economic growth, not for its own sake but so that we can tackle poverty and improve our public services.

The unfortunate reality is that the Scottish Government is operating with one hand tied behind its back. Scotland has had no control over the fallout from the United Kingdom Government's disastrous mini-budget or Brexit or more than a decade of austerity, but we still have to deal with the devastating consequences of those actions. To give just one example, in the past five years, we have spent more than £700 million in countering the impact of Westminster welfare cuts alone. That is why this Government will never stop believing that decisions about Scotland should not be made by a Government that is based in Westminster, but by the people of Scotland. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I remind members that there should be no interventions or interruptions of any kind during the statement.

The First Minister: Independent countries that are comparable to Scotland are wealthier and fairer than the UK. With our abundant resources, the question that we must ask ourselves is, why not Scotland? In proposing the case for independence, we will set out a positive vision for Scotland's future, and there is much to be positive about. Scotland's economy already performs better than that of most parts of the UK. We have world-class universities and colleges and significant strengths and potential in many of the key economic sectors of the future. Today's programme sets out how we will build on those strengths to make people's lives better.

Tackling poverty is deeply personal to me. Growing up in the Islamic faith, I was taught that one of the core beliefs of that faith is that you are not a true Muslim if you have a full stomach while your neighbour goes to bed hungry. Tackling poverty is not straightforward, especially given the restrictions of devolution and in the face of a cost of living crisis and a challenging budget settlement. However, it is absolutely essential. Whether it is from faith, humanism or an ingrained sense of social justice, we must all surely unite in saying that, in 2023, with the abundance of wealth that we have as a society, it is morally indefensible that people in our country and on our planet go to sleep hungry. My first announcement today is therefore this: by February, we will remove income thresholds for our best start foods programme, which will mean that a further 20,000 pregnant mothers and children will benefit from financial support for milk and healthy food. That is a further demonstration of this Government giving our children the best possible start.

We will also invest more than £400 million in the Scottish child payment to help more than 300,000 children across the country. For many families, the payment, which is worth £25 per child per week, ensures that food is on the table or that the heating is on at home. We can already see the benefits of that policy, but its true legacy will last a lifetime. Through this Government's actions, an estimated 90,000 children have been lifted out of poverty. That is the difference that this Government is making.

The Scottish child payment is part of a total investment of more than £5 billion in Scottish Government social security payments, which support more than 1.2 million people. I can confirm that the funding will increase by almost £1 billion in the year ahead, and we will continue to explore what more can be done to tackle poverty during the budget process.

We have also convened an expert group to look at how we can make progress towards a minimum income guarantee. Today, I am calling on the UK Government to use reserved powers to establish an essentials guarantee to ensure that the value of the universal credit payment is always sufficient for people to afford essential items such as food, transport and energy.

In addition to those actions, we will continue to reduce some of the costs that affect households across the country.

This Government has led the way in the provision of universal free school meals for primary school children. I can confirm that, working with councils, we will roll out universal free school meals for all pupils in primary 6 and primary 7, starting with those children who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment.

From October, we are introducing a pilot project to remove peak fares on ScotRail services. In addition, we recognise that housing costs are a key factor in determining people's standard of living. During the cost of living crisis, this Government took prompt action to introduce emergency rent caps for most private tenants and to introduce additional protections against eviction. We have now laid regulations to ensure that those measures will remain in place until 31 March next year.

We will also introduce a housing bill to introduce long-term rent controls and new tenants' rights, and to establish new duties for the prevention of homelessness. We will continue to work to reduce the number of people who are living in temporary accommodation. We will invest £750 million to support the delivery of affordable homes and to meet our target of securing 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. Of those homes, 10 per cent will be located in our rural and island communities, because we know that those communities are facing significant housing challenges.

We also know, however, that those communities are not passive. We see in the likes of the Arran Development Trust, Mull and Iona Community Trust and Staffin Community Trust real ambition in supporting new housing. We have been working with local government, business, the third sector and—crucially—local communities to publish an action plan for housing in rural and island areas later this year.

We have established a £25 million fund to provide homes for key workers in rural areas. Across Scotland, we will invest £60 million this year to acquire empty properties for use as affordable homes. I can confirm that, following consultation, we will also enable councils to apply a premium on council tax rates for second homes—a demonstration of our desire to

empower local government to tackle the challenges that it faces

We will introduce a cladding remediation bill and ask that this Parliament be given the powers to introduce a levy in Scotland that mirrors the UK Government's building safety levy for England.

The protection of and, where possible, the advancement of rights is a collective obligation on each and every single one of us. I have spoken about the racism and Islamophobia that I have faced and continue to face. Many others in this Parliament have spoken about the bigotry, homophobia, ableism or misogyny that they have been on the receiving end of. As part of our mission to promote equality and eradicate hatred, we will improve human rights protections through our human rights bill.

There are those in this Parliament who have said recently that we concentrate far too much on social policy. However, it is our job—and every MSP's job—to help protect marginalised communities from the hatred that is far too pervasive in society. A population that has its rights protected is one that can thrive. That is good not only for society but for our economy, too.

Finally, on the theme of equality, we recognise that helping people into good, fairly paid work is also a key part of tackling poverty. We will work with local authorities and employers to help people who face barriers to starting or restarting work and we will support care leavers into employment. That is just one of the ways in which we will work to keep our Promise to those with experience of care. I will also personally convene a dedicated Cabinet sub-committee for the Promise. We will not let those with care experience down.

This Government also recognises the crucial role of childcare in helping parents to return to work, which benefits not just the parents themselves but the wider economy. The Scottish Government has expanded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours a year for all three and four-year-olds, and for around a quarter of all two-year-olds.

I am pleased to announce that we will go further. First, we will provide funding in six early-adopter council areas to increase access to childcare from when children are aged nine months through to the end of their time at primary school. Secondly, we will accelerate the next phase in our expansion of childcare for families with two-year-olds—reaching thousands more families. Thirdly, we will give parents and carers more scope to manage their childcare so that it meets their specific needs. Some parents may want to use a mix of provision, and may find arranging and keeping track of their childcare stressful. We will simplify that process to enable

parents to use digital means in order to have more control over their childcare choices. Fourthly, we will support efforts to recruit and retain more childminders; we aim to recruit a thousand more childminders by the end of this parliamentary session. Finally, we know that recruitment is one of the biggest challenges that the sector faces. I confirm today that we will provide funding so that staff in the private, voluntary and independent sector who deliver funded early learning and childcare are paid a minimum of £12 an hour from April 2024.

High-quality early education and childcare is a perfect example of a policy that is both anti-poverty and pro-growth. I am proud that Scotland has the most generous childcare offer in the UK and I am committed to ensuring that we stay at the forefront of that and provide families with the crucial support that they need.

One of my earliest actions as First Minister was to develop a new and stronger relationship with business, so that we can work together to create jobs and opportunities. In the year ahead, we will implement the recommendations made by the new deal for business group. Where we can, we will also work with the UK Government to support growth. I wrote to the UK Government yesterday to request discussions on that very issue. One idea that I am keen to explore with the UK Government is a recommendation in the recent report from the Hunter Foundation about using tax incentives and wider economic policy to support investment in key sectors such as renewables.

Scotland has long been a nation of innovation and invention. However, for all the excellent success that we have had, we also have to be honest and recognise that we have not always managed to retain in Scotland that entrepreneurial talent and the jobs that it creates. Our programme for government sets out a £15 million plan to support innovation and entrepreneurship. It includes increased support for Scottish EDGE and the Scottish ecosystem fund; continued work to implement Mark Logan's review of our technology ecosystem; a blueprint to make our colleges and universities stronger bases for entrepreneurs; and a programme to deliver the recommendations of Ana Stewart's equally excellent report on supporting women into enterprise.

We will also work to attract international investment and promote exports. We will support small businesses; for example, we will work with local government and our enterprise agencies to transform the support that we provide to them. We will work with business organisations to help small businesses to improve their productivity. We will build on the work of the new deal for business group by considering improvements to the non-domestic rates system. Those early actions

demonstrate our determination to listen and act as we build a new relationship with business to support economic growth for a purpose.

In the year ahead, we will also invest in the construction of six new ferries by 2026. Alongside our record investment in active travel, we will reopen the Levenmouth rail line, electrify the Glasgow to Barrhead line and open a new rail station at East Linton.

We are, of course, committed to improving the A96, including dualling the road from Inverness to Nairn, with a Nairn bypass. Let me be crystal clear, Presiding Officer: my Government will dual the A9 from Inverness to Perth. I confirm today that we have launched the procurement for the Tomatin to Moy section as the next step in that work.

We are also helping the rural economy. In the coming year, we will help to create a new framework for rural support through the agriculture bill. We will promote our food and drink industry and we will press the UK Government to honour its obligations to our fishing sector.

When it comes to Scotland's land, it is clear that too much of our land is in the hands of too few. Our land reform bill will make land ownership more transparent and will give communities more opportunities to own their land. We will step up to the challenge and seek to be bold and radical, and we will continue to develop proposals for crofting law reform.

We will continue to support Scotland's thriving tourism sector and promote major events. We will publish further details of our future support for culture in the forthcoming budget. The sector should be assured that this Government values the role of culture not just for the substantial economic impact that it has but also for the incredible joy that it brings to people in Scotland and around the world.

The final part of our economic plans that I want to talk about is also one of the most important. We need only to look at the United States or the European Union to see the way in which ambitious Government and state support for green industries is helping to create new jobs. The inactivity of the United Kingdom Government puts us at risk of falling behind in an increasingly competitive race, so the Scottish Government is taking action, with the limited powers that we have, to boost green industries.

One important area where I can announce change is in the consenting processes for renewable technologies. We will agree a sector deal with the onshore wind industry to halve the consenting time for new section 36 wind farms. As part of that deal, we will maximise the benefits that onshore wind can create for local communities

and for Scotland's economy. We will also streamline offshore wind consenting processes and continue to implement our hydrogen action plan.

I continue to appeal to the UK Government, which holds the substantial levers over tax and financial incentives, to use those powers to unleash and accelerate the renewables potential of our country. Our economy and, indeed, our planet deserve better than Westminster inertia.

We will also take forward our work on a green industrial strategy. We will consult on a heat in buildings bill, and we will continue to promote a circular economy. We will publish our final energy strategy and just transition plan, and we will continue to protect and enhance our natural environment. Crucially, we will continue to show global leadership in international climate discussions.

As well as the enormous economic opportunity created by climate action, there is also an overwhelming moral imperative. The terrifying impacts of climate change are not something to worry about in the distant future—they are here today. In that context, some of the actions of the Westminster parties over this summer, such as the UK Government's reluctance to support onshore wind, its commitment to more than 100 new oil and gas licences and Labour's U-turn on low emission zones are as baffling as they are dangerous. The Scottish Government will take a responsible approach and show climate leadership.

Tackling the climate crisis will be hard, but in the long run, doing nothing—or even worse, acting far too slowly—is the more expensive choice. It is a choice that will see far more lives lost on our planet, and a choice for which we would rightly never be forgiven by our children or our grandchildren.

The programme also sets out how we will support strong and high-quality public services. The national health service is already making progress in recovering from the pandemic. We have the best-performing accident and emergency departments in the UK, and in the past year, the number of people waiting more than 18 months for treatment has almost halved. We will work with health boards to reduce waiting lists further in the year ahead. A fourth national treatment centre will open in Forth Valley in the coming year, and the centre at the Golden Jubilee hospital will increase our capacity. We will continue to work with local authorities on the introduction of the national care service.

During the summer, I spent a considerable amount of time hearing directly from people from all walks of life across the country about the

challenges that they struggle with. One such group, which is inspirational, is the Purple Poncho Players, which is a theatrical group made up of disabled people who put on gripping performances that challenge Governments and everyone in society to confront the uncomfortable truth of life as a disabled person in Scotland. I heard very moving testimony from them, the Glasgow Disability Alliance and others who have been affected by the closure of the independent living fund, which was designed to assist disabled people with especially complex needs to get the support that they need in order to live independent lives. I am therefore pleased to announce today that I will reopen the independent living fund in the next financial year, with an initial investment of up to £9 million.

In the year ahead, we will also improve access to general practitioner services, and we will launch the national centre for remote and rural health and care. We will publish a new delivery plan for mental health and wellbeing. We will continue with our mission to reduce drug deaths, and we will invest in alcohol and drug partnerships. Recent drug deaths figures show that we are heading in the right direction but no more than that. The scale of the challenge in front of us requires us to take radical approaches. Those approaches must be grounded in the evidence of what works. That is why we will support a proposal to establish a safer drug consumption facility and argue for drugs law reform. In the light of the latest Home Office select committee report, I urge the UK Government to listen to the evidence and either support a safer drug consumption facility or at least devolve the power to us, so that we can more easily take the bold action that is required.

We are also reviewing the responses to the alcohol marketing consultation. We will always support jobs and the economy, and we will work with the industry where appropriate, but be in no doubt that we will take further action to reduce alcohol harm and particularly to protect children from its ill effects.

Talking of children, I hear too often about how common vaping is among our young people. In the next year, we will take action to reduce vaping, particularly among children. I am pleased to announce that the Government will also consult on curbing the sale of disposable single-use vapes, including consulting on an outright ban.

The Government recognises the vital importance of supporting our health and care workforce. Scotland remains the only part of the UK in which there has been no industrial action in the health service. That is because we never questioned the motivations of our workforce in seeking higher pay in the midst of a cost of living crisis and we were prepared to face up to some

very challenging negotiations. We worked with unions and agreed deals that benefit patients and staff. As a result, we have ensured that NHS Scotland staff remain the best paid anywhere in the UK.

I am pleased to confirm that, today, I will fulfil a promise that I made to social care staff before I became First Minister. We will provide funding to enable an increase in the pay of social care workers in direct care roles so that they can be paid at least £12 an hour. For those on full-time contracts, that could lead to a pay increase from April of up to £2,000 a year. That increase of over 10 per cent values our social care staff, helps them to support their families and helps us to recruit and retain staff. It is good for individual employees, our social care services and our society as a whole.

Another issue that is close to my heart, as First Minister and as a husband and a father, is miscarriage. I have spoken before about the personal loss and trauma that my wife, Nadia, and I have faced through multiple miscarriages. That is a health issue that society is now more open about, but it is still less talked about than it maybe should be. I know how the sense of loss, regardless of when it happens during a pregnancy, is one that stays with people for life. Each loss that Nadia and I have suffered has been difficult, and there is no doubt in my mind that we can better support those who experience miscarriage.

The programme for government outlines how we will continue to improve care and support for miscarriage, including by ensuring that women do not have to wait until a third miscarriage to receive tailored support. It will also help to provide access to progesterone prescriptions and secure separate spaces in hospitals within maternity wards for women who suffer a miscarriage.

I am also pleased to say that, later this month, we will launch a certificate and memorial book of pregnancy and baby loss prior to 24 weeks. I thank and pay tribute to my predecessor for the work that she has done on that particular issue.

The Government will continue to support our schools and promote excellence in education. We will introduce an education bill to establish a new qualifications body in Scotland and to create an independent education inspectorate. We will set out plans for reforming our education and skills bodies, and we will deliver the pay deal that we have reached with our teachers.

We will continue our work to widen access to university. That work is now seeing record numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds—around 5,600 in the latest official statistics—enter our universities.

We will rejoin key international education studies. We will continue to focus on closing the attainment gap and improving outcomes for young people with additional support needs. We will continue to support equality and diversity in schools—for example, through our anti-racism in education programme and by promoting a decolonised curriculum.

We will invest in our police, fire and justice services. Body-worn cameras are a priority for the police and for the Government, so we will start to introduce that technology next year.

We have already reduced the backlog of cases in our justice system by more than a third, and we will aim to end the backlog in summary cases in 2024. We will invest in our prisons while working with community justice partners to reduce reoffending and create safer communities. We will continue to focus on ensuring that victims and witnesses of crime are at the heart of our justice system.

We live in times when the rights of women in many parts of the world are regressing. It is important for Governments that believe passionately in taking a stand against misogyny—including state and institutional misogyny—to stand up and be counted. That is why we will work with Gillian Mackay to support her bill to ensure safe access for abortion. It simply cannot be right that women should feel in any way impeded from accessing healthcare. We will also bring forward legislation to criminalise misogynistic abuse, following the public consultation on Baroness Kennedy's report on the issue.

Before I close, I will expand on that point. The #MeToo movement, the reclaim the night marches and the response to the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa have instigated a movement of women sharing their stories about everyday sexism, harassment and the tragic and violent crimes that women are too often subjected to. The steps that the Scottish Government is taking to criminalise misogynistic abuse and improve our criminal justice system are in part a response to that, but they cannot be the only response. There is a much bigger responsibility on our society as a whole—and particularly on all men—to create a positive change.

Men—all of us, including me—need to do more than simply call out negative male behaviour. We need to tackle what is often called toxic masculinity, which harms men and boys as well as women and girls, and we must build a society where men feel confident in taking a stand against misogyny. To do so, we must promote the positive and highlight to boys and men the benefits of positive masculinity for their everyday lives—how it can mean building respectful and healthier relationships with partners, families, colleagues

and society and how it can lead to better mental health and wellbeing for men and boys.

The Scottish Government does not have all the answers on that and cannot take it on alone, but it is a challenge that we will return to. As First Minister, I am committed to leading on the issue in my actions and in those of the Government that I lead.

At the start of my statement, I made it clear that the Scottish Government will always be on the side of the people we serve. Scotland is and certainly should be a land of opportunity, but I know that it does not always feel like that to people who are bearing the brunt of the Westminster cost of living crisis, to families who are living in poverty, to struggling businesses and to those who still face the consequences of discrimination and inequality. I get that.

That is why the programme for government tackles poverty and inequality head on, as part of our work to create opportunities and build strong communities. In the year ahead, we will help more than 300,000 children with more than £1,000 a year through the Scottish child payment; we will increase social security spending by almost £1 billion; we will expand free school meal provision; we will widen access to financial advice; we will help more parents to buy healthy food; we will help disabled people with the most complex needs, so that they can live independent lives; we will safeguard tenants' rights; we will promote payment of the living wage; we will increase the pay of childcare and social care staff; and we will expand high-quality childcare.

We will do all of that first and foremost because it is the right thing to do but also because, as I know from my family history, providing people with support and security helps them to contribute to society and to create opportunities for others.

The programme for government sets out how we will work with partners to tackle poverty, promote growth and strengthen the public services that we all depend on. The people of Scotland should be left in absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the Scottish Government is on their side. The programme for government shows how we will make progress towards a fairer, wealthier and greener Scotland, and I am delighted to commend it to Parliament.

Programme for Government 2023-24

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on the programme for government 2023-24. I would be grateful if members who wish to contribute would press their request-to-speak button.

14:55

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

As Parliament returns, I welcome back colleagues. I also want to say how good it is to see BBC Scotland's political editor Glenn Campbell in the press gallery. [*Applause.*] Glenn is a formidable interviewer and is rightly respected by his colleagues and by those he reports on. I know that I speak for every MSP from every party in wishing him and his family well in the journey ahead.

Last week, I called on the First Minister to rise to the big challenges that Scotland is facing today, to ditch the discredited agenda of his predecessor and to be his own man, but what we have here today is very much the same as before. Far from the bold programme for Scotland that we were promised, we are getting the same tinkering around the edges on our public services; consultations and trials rather than promises and delivery; extreme Green policies that will devastate our economy and rural communities; and, of course, very predictably, the overwhelming focus on the Scottish National Party's obsession with independence. SNP members are laughing. In the First Minister's statement that we have just heard, independence was mentioned before education, before the national health service and before the economy. Humza Yousaf has already told us that independence will be "page 1, line 1" of the SNP manifesto and it is right at the front of the programme for government.

It could be so much better than that. With a £60 billion budget and the support of thousands of civil servants, this is the best that Nicola Sturgeon's protégé can do. Where is the urgency, ambition and action? After 16 years of SNP government, our children get a worse education than we did. When they leave school, they will have reduced access to higher education and fewer good opportunities. When they grew old, they will be waiting longer for life-saving ambulances or on NHS waiting lists for essential treatment.

This reheated programme for government and the proposals in it show that Humza Yousaf's Government has done nothing to reverse the decline that we have seen over 16 years of an SNP Government.

When Scotland needed a national Government, we have once again been given a nationalist Government. Instead of speaking to Scotland, Humza Yousaf would rather be marching alongside flag-waving independence diehards, like he was at the weekend, and he would rather be campaigning as the self-titled "First Activist" than governing as First Minister. The programme reflects that.

I will turn to the detail of what we have heard this afternoon. There are some slim positives that we would like to focus on. We welcome the commitment to finally tackle unsafe cladding. My colleagues Graham Simpson and Miles Briggs have been campaigning for action on that for many, many months, and it is right that action will now be taken to mirror legislation that Michael Gove in the United Kingdom Government introduced back in March.

Before my next point, I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I am the husband of a practising police officer. We welcome the pay deal that has been reached with the police and the fact that body-worn cameras will be introduced.

In addition, the Conservatives welcome the commitment to roll-out of childcare from nine months in line with the UK Government's proposals that were announced in its previous budget.

However, that is where the praise for Humza Yousaf's programme for government ends. Much of his programme was committed to by his predecessor. Far from relaunching his premiership, the programme digs in deeper into the mud of Nicola Sturgeon's policy failures.

We were promised that this would be a plan of Humza Yousaf's first real opportunity to show what his own priorities are, yet, after half a year in office, he is literally just continuing on from where we have been before. Instead, it is business as usual from this continuity Government and continuity First Minister.

The programme is also a lot of talk and little action. Let us look at some of the talk that we heard from the First Minister. He was patting himself on the back by telling us all that he had developed a new and stronger relationship with business, so let us see how that has been judged.

This week, the Fraser of Allander Institute found that only 9 per cent of Scottish businesses believe that Humza Yousaf's Government understands them. What a reset it is when 9 per cent of businesses in Scotland think that he and his Government understand them. Only 8 per cent of businesses think that the Government is listening effectively to their sectors. The First Minister is not even listening now, but he is certainly not listening

to businesses when 8 per cent in that survey say that the Government has closed its ears to them.

There were no commitments in the programme for government to pass on the business rates relief that has been given in England and Wales to help struggling shops, pubs and hotels.

The First Minister also spoke about supporting a thriving tourism sector. He will do that by shutting it down. Unlike the majority of his colleagues, I was outside the Parliament this afternoon listening to bed and breakfast owners who are saying that the legislation on short-term lets that has been passed and will come into force on 1 October if there is no further delay will close them down. That legislation will wreak havoc in the tourism industry across Scotland and the deaf ears in the Government will lead to those businesses closing.

The First Minister should be ashamed and accept that he has got it wrong again. It was right that there was a pause for six months to look at how that legislation could be improved. His Government did nothing in that time. If he will not accept the failures of the legislation and announce a further pause within the next week, the Scottish Conservatives will force a vote on the issue next week.

We need to listen to the businesses that will stop and go out of business. The Scottish Conservatives are listening to them; the First Minister is ignoring them. Let us ensure that their voice is heard in the Parliament. I hope that colleagues on the Government benches will also listen to their constituents.

Last week, the Scottish Conservatives published our own bold and ambitious plan to grow Scotland's economy, make Scotland more competitive within the United Kingdom, deliver a national workforce plan and tackle regional imbalances through innovation and entrepreneurship.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Mr Ross talks about a bold economic plan that the Conservatives published, but that plan does not include dealing with Brexit, which has stymied our economy and destroyed many people's lives. What does he have to say about that?

Douglas Ross: I made it clear when I announced the plan last week that we are looking not just at the coming months or years but at the coming decades. There are scary warnings about the future of Scotland's economy not from Opposition parties but from the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which said that, in the next 50 years, Scotland will not have the income to deliver the services that we have at the moment. We are looking into the future. Kevin Stewart and others can look into the past, but we need to be far more positive. We need to ensure that we grow

Scotland's economy. We will never get that from high-tax Humza and the current SNP Government.

There were opportunities last week and there are still opportunities for the First Minister to take on board the practical recommendations that would show that jobs and businesses are his priorities. However, he continues to be led by the extremist Greens, who do not believe in a wealthier Scotland. They want to shut down our North Sea oil and gas sector as soon as possible despite the sector supporting tens of thousands of Scottish jobs and contributing more than £9 billion to Scottish public spending.

The SNP and the Greens do not seem to realise that, if we were to withdraw from the North Sea, it would devastate communities across the north of Scotland and remove the biggest source of investment and skills for the development of renewable energy projects in Scotland. The First Minister should abandon his predecessor's position, pull rank on his Green coalition partners and back Scotland's oil, or else there will not be an SNP MP left in the north-east of Scotland after the next election. I do not hold out much hope for the SNP MPs in that area.

We got one mention of oil and gas in the First Minister's statement, and do members know how many mentions of oil and gas there are in the accompanying documents to the programme for government? Zero. There is not one mention of that key sector for the north of Scotland, the whole of Scotland and the United Kingdom. That tells us everything that we need to know about the First Minister's priorities.

There was discussion about infrastructure. We are in a debate, and I am keen to take an intervention from the First Minister at any point, but particularly now, because he made a very clear commitment that his Scottish Government will fully dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness. I therefore ask the First Minister when that will happen.

There is nothing. I will give way to the First Minister, because this is a serious issue. The First Minister inserted the issue into his programme for government and claims that it is a big announcement, but there is nothing to back it up. This is a crucial infrastructure project that is vital for Perthshire and the Highlands of Scotland—indeed, it is crucial for connectivity across our country. Last year, we had the highest death rate on that road in 20 years, but the First Minister cannot say when his promise will be delivered.

The First Minister mentioned the A96. The SNP has gone from saying that it would fully dual the A96 to saying that there will be improvements. I welcome the Nairn bypass and the improvements from Inverness to Nairn that have been

mentioned, but the A96 goes from Inverness to Aberdeen. What about the rest of the route? The previous promise was to fully dual the road, but now we are going to get only improvements along the way.

There is nothing in the programme for government about a long-term solution to the issue of landslides on the A83. Although we heard that six new ferries will be delivered in the next couple of years, we currently have a couple of ferries that are already six years late, so I do not hold out much hope for that, either.

In the time remaining, I want to look at some of the issues that got only a fleeting mention from the First Minister. On the NHS, he promised that he will make it easier for patients to see their general practitioner and that GPs will be more accessible. It would be quite good if his health secretary, who I do not think is in the chamber today, would meet GPs—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—I missed Mr Matheson there. I mentioned him because he has refused to meet campaigners on the issue of GPs in my local area. I have written to him several times. They got in touch with me again to say that they had had a disappointing letter back from Mr Matheson. We also have campaigners trying to keep surgeries open in Burghead and Hopeman, and he is not willing to meet them, either.

It was interesting that the First Minister mentioned what he is doing to improve the NHS on the day that it was confirmed that there are now 820,000 Scots on NHS waiting lists, which is a new record. Back in March, when the figure had dropped, the First Minister said that it was “heartening” that waiting lists were going down, but the figure has now increased by 51,000. I will give way to the First Minister this time if he will tell us what his response is to the fact that 820,000 Scots are on waiting lists, which is up 51,000 and a record level. Is that heartening?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank the member for the invitation to contribute. I say to Douglas Ross that it is the case for every single person who is waiting too long that we do not want them to wait so long. That is why it is so important to increase wages for social care workers to help with the recovery of our NHS. What would never have helped our NHS to address waiting lists and waiting times is if we had had industrial action, as other parts of the UK have had, especially where the Conservatives are in charge. I hope that Douglas Ross, with any marginal influence that he has, will ask Steve Barclay to take up Michael Matheson’s offer so that we can mediate and ensure that junior doctors in England are paid fairly, just as they are here in Scotland. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back for that, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I cannot believe that SNP members are actually applauding that. There we have it—NHS waiting lists in Scotland are at record levels, up 51,000, with 820,000 Scots on a waiting list, and that is the dismal response that we get from Scotland’s First Minister.

I will rush through the last couple of things that I want to mention. The First Minister said in his statement that he is willing to work with other parties. If so, please work with me and with Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour supporters, Scottish Liberal Democrats and, I know, SNP supporters who back the right to recovery bill. Yes, we saw a reduction in the number of drug deaths in 2022, but we still have the worst rate in the United Kingdom and, by a large margin, the worst rate in Europe. In his statement, the First Minister endorsed Gillian Mackay’s bill. He could do the same right now by saying that he backs the right to recovery bill 100 per cent and that SNP members will vote for it.

The First Minister: First and foremost, I have not seen the detail of the bill. If Douglas Ross has published it, I am more than happy to look at the detail. When I met him before the summer, he said that the bill would be published by the summer recess, but it has not been published. He is obviously still working on the detail. On the point about influence, will he please ensure that the UK Government takes an evidence-based approach and that, if it is not willing to be radical and bold, it at least devolves the powers to us so that we can take forward safer drug consumption facilities?

Douglas Ross: It is clear that the First Minister, in his programme for government statement, backed Gillian Mackay’s bill, which is not at as advanced a stage as my bill is, so he could surely do the same for the right to recovery bill.

There are two other issues that I want to speak about. At our meeting back in the summer, Humza Yousaf promised me that an agriculture bill would be coming to the Parliament before the Royal Highland Show. He told me that that is a big show in Edinburgh that lasts a couple of days—I know that; it actually lasts four days and I have been to it every year. The point is that the agriculture bill was promised before the summer recess, but we have still heard no more about it. We will have to wait another year. Farmers and crofters are crying out for the bill, and I know that Rachael Hamilton will say more about that in her speech later.

Finally, Humza Yousaf mentioned support for the police. I have already welcomed the pay deal that has been reached today. However, the comments about the police come from Humza

Yousaf—someone who wanted the police to investigate a hoax video but who now does not seem to want them to investigate real crimes. That is what we heard in the north-east of Scotland yesterday. That is the direction of travel on justice from the SNP Government.

Today's statement could have delivered so much for Scotland. There was the opportunity to reset the agenda in relation to business, the economy, our NHS and education. In all areas, the programme for government has failed. It is continuity from a continuity First Minister. It should be and could be so much better. Over the coming year, the Scottish Conservatives will scrutinise what comes forward and will come up with and offer the real alternatives that focus on the real priorities of people across Scotland.

15:12

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I will start with a point of consensus. I echo Douglas Ross's comments about Glenn Campbell. It is fantastic to see him back on his feet, and we wish him and his family all the best.

There are undoubtedly some things that we welcome and support in today's programme for government. The acceptance of Scottish Labour's long-standing campaign to increase pay for social care staff to £12 an hour is welcome, but we would like to see the pathway to the fight for £15. We support the proposals on empty homes and second homes, even though we believe that they could go further and be stronger. We support the commitment to criminalise misogyny, as well as the proposals that the First Minister has set out to support those who are impacted by miscarriage. We also support the intention to improve partnership with business and to work on an industrial strategy, but that must be more than rhetoric. Businesses will judge the Government on delivery, not on bland promises.

The First Minister cannot hide from reality. The SNP Government has lost its way and has no clear direction, no sense of purpose and no central mission. It cannot escape from the fact that it is trying to clear a mess of its own making—16 years of incompetence and financial mismanagement. The truth is that Scotland needs a programme for government to match the scale of the twin crises that are hitting Scots—a cost of living crisis and an NHS crisis. It took the First Minister 22 minutes to even mention our national health service. The package that has been set out today is not good enough, it is not bold enough and it will not do enough to confront those challenges.

Families need a Government that is relentlessly focused on reducing the burdens on their household incomes in the middle of a cost of living

crisis. Instead, they get a Government that will hit them with council tax and income tax rises. Scots also need a clear plan for bringing down waiting times and reducing waiting lists in order to confront the NHS crisis. Instead, too many of them are left waiting in pain or are being pushed further into debt by being forced to go private.

We needed a new vision and a meaningful strategy to fix the long-standing underlying failure that has only made responding to these twin crises harder—we needed a plan to grow Scotland's economy. Instead, over the summer, we have seen the Government lurch from one scandal to the next, whether that be uncertainty over the SNP's finances, indulgent spending on credit cards at the taxpayer's expense or division on the back benches among those inside the SNP who are clearly uncomfortable with the direction of travel—or who can perhaps sense that there is no direction at all from the First Minister and the SNP Government.

The First Minister himself admitted that today was a bit of a relaunch and that things had to go well, but I have lost count of the number of false starts and rebrands that the First Minister has attempted in the past six months. When it comes to the substance, there might be an attempt to change the headline—as we have seen today—but that cannot hide a more difficult truth: the First Minister was a continuity candidate who is now left painting the windows on a Government that is responsible for 16 years of failure.

The First Minister: Anas Sarwar calls me a continuity candidate, but it would be helpful if he could hold on to one principle over the course of a summer without U-turning. We saw a summer of U-turns from Labour. Anas Sarwar now supports the two-child limit, the bedroom tax and the rape clause. Is it not the truth that, in the SNP, the people of Scotland have an anti-poverty, pro-growth Government, whereas what they have with Scottish Labour is simply a party that will do what head office tells it to do?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Anas Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: I am actually really pleased that the First Minister made that intervention. He would rather attack a party that has not been in government than look at his own record in government. One in four children is in poverty on the SNP's watch. Just last week, we saw record levels of homelessness applications and children in temporary accommodation. There is silence among members on the SNP back benches when it comes to looking at the their record in government. Enough of the spin, the cheap headlines and blaming somebody else; instead, they should focus on their failure as a Government. *[Interruption.]* They can laugh if they

like, but the Scottish people will get their chance to make their judgment on the SNP Government. I cannot wait for them to make that judgment, which will happen in Rutherglen and Hamilton West very soon.

Instead of being a reset, today's statement reveals a tired Government that is out of energy, without focus and too distracted by internal squabbling to manage more than a tinkering around the edges. In the past 12 months, there has been a lot of superficial change at the top of the Scottish Government. However, although the ferry master might have changed, the boat is still not seaworthy. This is just another tired and rehashed programme from a party that has clearly run out of ideas.

Nowhere is that clearer than with our national health service, with a former health secretary waiting more than 22 minutes to talk about it. Across Scotland, 820,000 people are languishing on NHS waiting lists. We are two years on from the then health secretary, Humza Yousaf, publishing his NHS recovery plan. It promised to end long waits, grow the economy and create more capacity, but the experience of patients and staff has been the opposite. One in seven Scots is on an NHS waiting list; there are more than 5,600 nursing and midwifery vacancies; and the number of consultancy vacancies is up, too.

This is what we have come to expect from Humza Yousaf and the SNP Government: big announcements to get the headline but no implementation when in government. Promises to end delayed discharge back in 2015 were never met and are now costing the NHS £198 million a year. Commitments to end waits of longer than a year hang in tatters, with 77,500 Scots waiting more than 12 months for tests, appointments and treatment. Most shockingly of all, cancer treatment targets have been missed repeatedly since 2012. The failure to restore our NHS is a shameful failure.

A catch-up plan should mean waiting list numbers coming down, not going up. Scottish Labour has repeatedly called for a real NHS recovery that ends the cuts to primary care and prioritises mental health support being made available in every general practitioner practice and surgery; that delivers a proper catch-up in cancer, with a focus on faster diagnosis and an end to long waits for treatment; that prioritises community care and paying social care staff properly, because that is how we will end delayed discharge and improve hospital capacity; and which prioritises a real workforce plan that retains the skills and knowledge of experienced staff and increases the number of doctors, nurses and medical professionals in training.

We could have seen that in the First Minister's programme today, if he had brought forward a new recovery plan for the NHS that would have got services back on track and dealt with the backlogs in diagnosis and care. Instead, we have heard old promises repeated and announcements that delay work that was promised years ago. There is precious little to resolve the problems of waiting lists, delayed diagnosis and workforce shortages that have left our much-loved NHS on its knees. Much like the one from two years ago, this year's programme for government is rhetoric without reality. There is no plan to reverse the crisis in our NHS. The utter lack of ambition could not be clearer.

There is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the SNP's plans, not only for the NHS but for economic growth and jobs. We are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, with families across the country facing far too many hardships. There are mothers in Scotland who are skipping meals right now in order to feed their children. That is the heartbreaking reality caused not only by Tory economic incompetence and failure but by SNP inaction and incompetence. The Tories crashed the economy and caused the hikes in interest rates that are bringing such misery to households here, but the SNP has not done enough to help Scotland. It is not just Labour saying that; a majority of Scots do not trust the SNP to act in Scotland's interests on the cost of living.

Labour asked the Scottish Government to help with the cost of commuting by following examples from elsewhere and capping bus fares and freezing the cost of rail travel. We called for Scottish Water's excess cash reserves to be repurposed as a £100 rebate on people's water bills and we set out proposals for a mortgage rescue scheme to ensure that no one would lose their home because of Tory economic chaos. Each time, the SNP ignored our asks, deciding instead to exacerbate the pressures on households by proposing tax hikes. If the First Minister really thinks that someone earning £28,000 in our country is somehow well off rather than struggling, and can therefore pay higher taxes, he is completely and utterly deluded about the reality facing households across the country.

The First Minister keeps saying, as we have heard already today, that tackling poverty is the central mission of his Government. Let us look at his record: a quarter of Scotland's children live in poverty; applications for help with homelessness have skyrocketed to the highest number ever; and more than 9,500 children—also the highest number ever—are living in temporary accommodation. Just today, it was revealed that three members of the Scottish Government's Poverty and Inequality Commission have

resigned, which is hardly a glowing advert for the First Minister and his announcements.

The SNP has lost its way. In 16 years, it has squandered the legacy of the Labour Government, which lifted 1 million children out of poverty. *[Interruption.]* SNP members can laugh at lifting a million children out of poverty, but both Scotland's Governments are distracted and divided and are failing to deliver. Only Scottish Labour offers a fresh start and real solutions.

As well as our proposals to help households with the cost of living, Labour has a plan to cut bills by up to £1,400, to invest in the renewables potential of Scotland and the UK and to deliver energy security, clean power and a publicly owned energy company to be headquartered here in Scotland while also insulating 1.4 million homes. Making the most of those proposals will require partnership between industry and Government so that we can build a thriving economy, but today we have heard a speech that is laden with rhetoric but is light on practical delivery.

We have had a Scottish Parliament for 24 years. It is right that many have viewed this as a social policy Parliament, but it has not been strong enough on economic policy. That has left Scottish workers let down and feeling the pinch and has weakened our potential for growth. We must put economic strategy and growth, as well as social policy, at the heart of this Parliament if we are to confront both the cost of living crisis and the crisis in the cost of doing business.

We heard about a reset for business. In the past year, ministers have shelved several plans that businesses said would be damaging to the economy, including plans for highly protected marine areas and a ban on advertising for Scotland's breweries and distilleries, and they have wasted money on the bottle deposit return scheme. How many of today's announcements does the First Minister think will end up on the same scrap heap after costing the taxpayer millions?

We stand ready to put economic growth back at the heart of our politics. We stand ready to deliver a modern industrial strategy that will get people round the table and remove barriers to investment. We stand ready to deliver a green prosperity plan that will put investment at the heart of delivering a clean energy superpower, and we stand ready to ensure that every part of our community benefits from having a Labour Government in our country.

Every community across our country deserves better. Communities have been let down for far too long. Right now, they are being let down by two failing Governments—a morally bankrupt Tory Government and a financially illiterate and incompetent SNP Government. We deserve better

than both of them. We deserve better than the cruel and out-of-touch Tories and we deserve better than a divided and distracted SNP.

Scottish Labour now offers the alternative. Only Labour can put the Tories out of number 10. Only Labour can bring our country together and bring about change for people across our country. Only Labour can tackle the cost of living crisis and save our NHS. Only Labour believes that our country's best days lie ahead. It is clear that the public believe that it is time for change. We are ready to deliver the change that Scotland needs.

15:25

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is my pleasure to respond to the First Minister on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, but before I do so, I offer our best wishes to Glenn Campbell. The warmth that he has received from members in the chamber is testament to the man that he is.

I will come on to the detail of what we have heard from the First Minister this afternoon, but I start with a priority that we heard nothing about. It is one that will, I think, dominate our considerations on the public sector estate for some time to come. Members will remember that I warned the First Minister, during the last First Minister's question time before the recess, about the risks that are posed by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—a material that was used in public sector construction for decades. We know that roofs, walls and floors that are made of that material risk “catastrophic structural failure” that could occur “suddenly” and “without warning”. Scottish Liberal Democrat research revealed that it is present in at least four health boards and 37 schools across Scotland.

During the summer months, when schools were closed, there was a golden opportunity to get on top of the matter, but those precious weeks were lost, and now our children our back in class. There is still no central register of affected buildings, no strategy for swift wholesale replacement of the material, and no national fund for making it safe. Now, parents are sending their children to school anxious that they might be in an unsafe building, and patients who are receiving treatment are unclear about what is holding up the roof above their heads. I am not trying to frighten people, but we have to take the situation seriously and recognise its urgency. We cannot wait for tragedy to be the catalyst for meaningful Government action.

Many people across Scotland are still struggling to make ends meet. It is baffling, therefore, that the SNP-Green Administration seems to be determined to make things harder. Even as

mortgages soar, food prices remain high and volatility continues in the global energy market, this Government has decided to hike rail fares. Last year, to great fanfare, it announced a price freeze, but that lasted only six months, and tickets are now going up once again and are set to rise still further.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): If Alex Cole-Hamilton is arguing for no fares increase, is he also arguing that the workers on the railway should not get a pay increase? That is where their money comes from.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I think that there is a basic rule of economics here. If we make something cheaper, we will increase demand and fill the carriages. That will pay for meaningful pay increases. I absolutely support the claim of hard-working rail workers.

However, the decisions of the Government mean that hard-working commuters are being clobbered by fares, which discourages people from using greener public transport. My party wants fares to be cut, with new options for flexible season ticketing, and we want the Government to work with councils to explore new lines. The fair fares review has now been on the desks of four transport secretaries.

Worse still is that our Government plans to increase council tax. That could not come at a worse time. Council tax is utterly regressive and is based on property values from 1991—32 years ago. Ordinary people will be hit hard by Government plans to hike council tax, and a quarter of Scottish households will be forced to pay more. Far from scrapping council tax, which Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon promised to do at the start of their reign, Humza Yousaf and his Green Party colleagues are breathing new life into that hated tax. The proposed changes would see bills going up and services still being cut, with people paying more for less. The proposal would not offset the SNP-Green systemic underfunding of local government, which has devastated essential services and has punctuated every budget for years. The increases must be abandoned and local government must, finally, be fully and properly funded.

Driving down demand for energy use and fossil fuels should also be at the heart of our quest for net zero in tackling the cost of living emergency. After a summer in which fires have raged from Greece to Hawaii, no one needs reminders of the urgency of avoiding global boiling.

I turn to our natural environment. Many times, in this chamber, I have raised the increasing problem of sewage in our rivers and on our beaches. I am disappointed to have heard nothing on that subject from the First Minister today. We do not even

know the full extent of the problem, because only a small fraction of sewage outflows are monitored. We are still massively behind England in that. The Government must get to grips with monitoring, publish every sewage dump, set legally binding targets for dumping and accelerate measures to upgrade Scotland's Victorian sewerage system. It is time that the Government cleaned up its act.

Sixteen years of SNP government have left our public services near breaking point. We have heard a lot about that. Nowhere is it more true than in our national health service, which is engulfed in crisis. Just moments ago, we heard from a British Medical Association chief that Scotland no longer has enough doctors to effectively staff our NHS. It is a service that is on its knees.

When Humza Yousaf was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, he made a personal promise in the NHS recovery plan to clear mental health waiting lists—yet, we are nowhere. Figures that were released today reveal that more than 2,500 children and adults are waiting for more than a year for mental health support. We need counsellors in our schools and mental health first aiders in our workplaces. We need proper 24/7 support and a massive national recruitment programme to train more professionals in talking therapy.

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care must tear up his failed recovery plan and start again. This time, it must include an NHS staff assembly and a burnout prevention strategy. It must properly recognise dentists and incentivise them to take on NHS patients so that everybody can be seen.

It must also include provision for all those who are battling long Covid. I cannot believe that we have yet another programme for government in which, once again, they have been completely forgotten. Last September—almost exactly a year ago—a group of children whose lives have been devastated by the condition visited the Parliament, at great cost to their health, to meet the then health secretary, Humza Yousaf, to ask for his help. He promised them that he would do everything that he could do; however, a year on, as he sits at the head of the Government, the words “long Covid” have barely left his lips. He has done nothing and there is not one mention of those words across the 60 pages of policy documents that were presented alongside his statement this afternoon.

I, too, met those children on that day. I carry with me their suffering and their stories. The Government must, without delay, establish long Covid clinics and a proper treatment pathway while ensuring that clinicians are trained to

diagnose and treat those who are affected by that terrible condition.

All that needs to be underpinned by a thriving economy. Low growth means less money for our public services. That has been borne out by the gross domestic product figures that were published last week, which make grim reading for Scotland.

In June, we heard the dreadful news that lifeline ferries had been hit by yet another six-month delay, which is further disrupting local economies, and with another £20 million in costs.

We know how important high-quality flexible childcare is to hard-working families and to our economy. The First Minister is right that we need to go further, but it is not clear whether the steps that he has outlined today will resolve the problems of those about whom I told him at the recent poverty summit—people who are unable to work due to inflexibility in childcare. In my constituency in the coming weeks I will chair a virtual town-hall meeting about the problem of scarcity of wraparound care. I am gratified to hear about recruitment of more childminders, but I fear that it will be a sticking plaster on a gaping wound.

This is a time of great change and great challenge. Across Scotland, old certainties are crumbling and new opportunities are emerging. Such times call for us to work hard and to work together in our communities with creativity and energy, and in a spirit of reform. Scottish Liberal Democrats are committed to playing our part in creating new hope and leading the way for change in Scotland. It is time for the Government to step up and play its part.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:34

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the programme for government. The announcements in it that have been made by the First Minister, particularly those in relation to early learning and childcare, are especially welcome and significant, so I would like to address the importance of those proposals in the efforts of the Scottish Government to grow the Scottish economy.

The provisions build on the transformation that has taken place in early learning since this Government came to power in 2007. Back then, three and four-year-olds were entitled to 475 hours a year of early learning and childcare. The provision was increased to 600 hours in 2014, which was, itself, a significant transformation. After the reforms in 2021, the figure now stands at 1,140 hours for three and four-year-olds and

eligible two-year-olds. That is a seismic change in provision of early learning and childcare, and is one of the most significant public service reforms that have been undertaken by any Government in Scotland.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Is John Swinney concerned that families from the poorest backgrounds are struggling most to access their free early learning and childcare?

John Swinney: That should not be the case. I point out to Pam Duncan-Glancy that there is formidably more investment in, and provision of, early learning and childcare than there was when any Labour Government was in power in Scotland at any stage in the past.

That change is a shining example of a policy development that improves outcomes across a range of policy areas by creating the best start for children in Scotland, by boosting economic growth and by tackling poverty. First, it provides us with the opportunity to ensure that every child in our country is getting the best start in life through access to play-based activity, which develops essential skills; through access to nutritious food, which develops the foundations of healthy living; and through access to support to address, at the earliest possible stage, issues that a child faces in their development.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): John Swinney mentioned food. It was promised that free school meals would be introduced by August 2022. The programme for government seems to suggest that it will be 2026 by the time they are introduced, and that, even then, they will be introduced only for a partial constituency. Can the member confirm that it will, in fact, be 2026 before we see the policy being realised?

John Swinney: I will maybe talk in a moment about some of the financial challenges that the Government faces as a consequence of the interventions of people such as Liam Kerr and their support for the actions of Liz Truss and her associates.

All the elements that I mentioned are critical to ensuring the best start in life for our children.

The second key policy benefit of ELC expansion has been the positive stimulus to economic growth and opportunity. The expansion itself has created new employment opportunities, but the provision has also enabled more parents to consider entering the labour market. At a time when we are still experiencing historically low levels of unemployment, which is welcome, and when the labour market is very tight due to the folly of Brexit, which is very unwelcome, it is vital that we take every measure to expand the labour market.

Thirdly, the expansion of early learning and childcare is part of a range of policy measures that are designed to combat child poverty, and which have been boosted in recent years by the introduction of the Scottish child payment. Unique in the United Kingdom and having been delivered during a cost of living crisis, the Scottish child payment is quite literally saving some of the most vulnerable citizens in our society today from destitution.

I support the Government's efforts in expanding early learning and childcare and in ensuring that major policy development is having a multifaceted impact on a range of policy areas. I encourage the Government—I welcome what the First Minister had to say on this—to ensure that the measures that are taken forward maximise the flexibility that is available to families, and that they are delivered in a way that suits families, in order to help to stimulate greater economic participation and growth.

One of the best projects that I have seen that puts those aspirations into practice is the MsMissMrs project in Maryhill, which is in the constituency of my friend Bob Doris. There, that women's empowerment organisation creates economic opportunity through childcare provision. That demonstrates how third sector partners can be involved to make that happen by listening carefully to the thoughts and input of those who are most affected by the reforms.

The proposals to expand early learning and childcare are taking place at a time of enormous financial strain on the public finances. Reforms of this type have to be paid for. It is worth noting that we are meeting today on the first anniversary of the election of Liz Truss as leader of the Conservative Party. I am reminded that the Conservatives here demanded that the Scottish Government follow the policy direction that was advocated by Liz Truss. They should look now at the damage that it has done. Look now at the perilous position of public finances. Look now at the very real hardship that is being faced by people who are wrestling with the massive impact on their lives of the increases in interest rates that have been foisted upon them by the Conservative Party and its folly. Look now at the damage that has been done.

In that context, the Scottish Government has taken tough decisions on tax by asking people who are on higher incomes to pay more in taxes in order to enable investment in our public services. It has taken measures including early learning and childcare expansion that boost economic growth. In answer to Pam Duncan-Glancy's question, I note that recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that the poorest 30 per cent of families in Scotland, are, on average, £2,000

better off each year as a result of this Government's choices; however, almost unbelievably, the leader of the Labour Party in Scotland now tells us that he does not support that progressive approach to taxation. What an absurdity with which to face the people of Scotland at this time.

There are tough choices to make in government. The fact that this Government has been prepared to make them has enabled the expansion of early learning and childcare, which will be good for our children and good for our economy. I encourage Parliament to give its enthusiastic support to the programme for government, which includes those essential provisions.

15:41

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Over the past few years, we have seen the former First Minister launch programmes for government that boasted of strength, resilience, fairness and green credentials, but we have rarely needed to look much further than the words in their titles to find the deficit between what was promised and what was delivered. The Scottish Government's delivery deficit matters to people who live and work in my constituency in the Borders, and it matters to people in our small towns, villages and rural communities across Scotland. They have heard all this before. We could stand here and pick apart the frenzy of flimsy policies that have been announced in the programme for government today, but I would prefer to consider how the Government intends to back up the programme for government with a real plan to deliver on what it has promised.

I welcome the First Minister's proposal to deliver more homes in rural areas. We need a solid plan to make rural Scotland a more attractive place for people to live and work, and I am sure that that is what the First Minister is getting at, although I cannot see him at the moment, so he will be missing my compliments. However, we need to know just how that plan will be delivered, and I am not convinced that what we have heard today leaves us any the wiser.

Farmers will be disappointed that they still have no idea when the new Scottish agriculture bill that will set out a framework to support our important farming industry will make its way through the Parliament. Given the length of time that farmers have had to wait without the ability to plan for the long term, we need to see the delivery of a practical piece of legislation. I say to the Government that it needs to get that on the table now, instead of keeping farmers in the dark through a pitiful lack of detail.

It is also good to hear the First Minister committing to taking action on addressing the crisis in primary care in rural areas, but those plans have been in the pipeline for years and no progress has been made. It is time to stop promising and start delivering.

In 2020, we were promised superfast broadband across rural Scotland through the reaching 100 per cent—R100—scheme. We are still waiting. Last year, the Government promised to improve the resilience of our ferry network, but now our island communities face more disruption than ever before and the SNP ferry fiasco continues to grow arms and legs. In one of the SNP's first ever programmes for government, it was announced that the A9 would be fully dualled by 2025. We are nowhere near achieving that and people's lives continue to be lost on that road.

The pattern of failure is not unique to rural Scotland, but it is symptomatic of the SNP-Green coalition, with its central belt agenda and central belt obsession, that so many of those failures have hit rural communities the hardest, and that is hard to take. The Government loves to talk about what it wants to do, but it rarely discusses how it intends to do it and when it does, it seems to lead to disaster. It rightly wants to look at providing protection for our marine environment, yet when it comes to making plans to do so, it completely fails to consider the impact that its plans would have on fishing communities.

The Government had the opportunity to gain cross-party support to improve recycling in Scotland, but instead it managed to ostracise almost all Scottish businesses. It has continually committed to restoring 250,000 hectares of peatland, but in every year since making that commitment, it has failed to get anywhere close to those figures.

A common theme in the Government's failure to deliver on promises that were made in recent programmes for government is the involvement of the Green Party. Throughout its catalogue of catastrophes, it has proven itself wholly unfit to govern. Humza Yousaf has doubled down on his backing for the Bute house agreement and the Green Party's reckless agenda, supporting plans to ban fishing in almost half of Scottish waters; rejecting calls from farmers to authorise the use of the chemical Asulox to control bracken; putting a block on vital road upgrades; and removing the close season for managing deer.

I understand that the Green Party's continued presence in the Government provides the SNP with a helpful scapegoat when things go wrong, but I am afraid that, for people who live and work in rural Scotland, the dangerous influence of the Greens, coupled with the lack of interest in rural

policies and priorities that the First Minister has shown, should not be tolerated any more.

We need a Government that delivers on its promises, but we also need a plan to be pragmatic, practical and sensible. We need action on Scotland's real priorities. For rural Scotland, that means delivering a practical agriculture bill as soon as possible; upgrading our roads to save lives; saving our surgeries; fixing the ferry fiasco; and accelerating the R100 programme. None of that should come as a surprise—it has been promised before. It is now time for this Government to get on and deliver for the whole of Scotland.

15:46

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I appreciate the opportunity to speak today. I follow Rachael Hamilton, who said that the Government's commitments were "flimsy", but I see a lot of them as solid and exciting commitments. If Rachael Hamilton thinks that they are flimsy, I presume that she will not be opposing long-term rent controls, for example.

I welcome in particular the fact that childcare provision is to be expanded and that care workers are to be paid £12 an hour. Of course we all want to go higher on that, but it has to be affordable. I welcome the cladding remediation bill that is to come, and the First Minister's comment that

"too much ... land is in the hands of too few."

That is a long-term problem for Scotland, but we need to keep making progress there. I welcome the reopening of the independent living fund; rent controls, which have been mentioned; and the fact that we can, as a party and as a country, be both pro-growth and anti-poverty.

I hope that everyone had a good holiday during recess. I had 10 days in Ireland, camping—members will not be surprised to hear—at different locations. It is fascinating to be in another country, especially when they speak English and I understand it, and to listen to the radio programmes and read the newspapers. Of course, Ireland has some of the same problems that we have—for example, it cannot get enough workers to do certain jobs.

However, one of the challenges that Ireland has with its finances is slightly different from the challenges that we have. It has such a large budget surplus that the question is what to do with it. If the country spent it all in one go, in the short term that would probably fuel inflation, so people in Ireland are discussing whether they should pay off the national debt or perhaps start a sovereign wealth fund. What a good problem that is to have.

Some Opposition members say that we should forget about independence and concentrate on the cost of living, inflation and so on. However, independence is the answer to those day-to-day problems. If Ireland can be so successful, as a small independent country without a lot of the resources that we have, then Scotland absolutely can. Ireland's situation is not exactly like ours, but it shows that freedom from London gives a country agility and the powers to respond much better to challenges as they come along.

One of the challenges with any programme for government these days is whether Westminster might randomly decide to veto something that it does not like. We saw that with the deposit return scheme—officials had been conducting apparently positive discussions on the scheme right into 2023 and then suddenly, out of the blue, Westminster pressed the veto button. That makes it difficult for any Scottish Government—or the Parliament—to plan ahead with certainty. I presume that any part of this year's programme for government, including the budget, could be blocked by the London Government if it took a notion to do so.

Naturally, the programme for government includes the annual budget—that should be no surprise. The main uncertainty with the budget remains at a UK level in relation to when the UK Government's autumn statement or budget might happen. Logically, the UK budget should come first, we would then build on that and then local government and other bodies would know the settlements in good time. However, in practice, we are left guessing to a large extent when the UK budget will be and what it will contain.

I am sure that there will be lots of time to discuss the Scottish budget as and when we get to it. However, I welcome the fact that committees are keeping the budget in their thinking all the way through the year. It is probably worth stressing once again that if Opposition parties would like more spending in one particular sector—as Rachael Hamilton has just called for in her speech—they have a responsibility to say where the money is to come from.

Rachael Hamilton: John Mason is completely missing the point. The delivery and outcomes are not as good in this country as they are in others. For example, the Scottish Government spends 50 per cent of gross domestic product on public spending but, compared with Germany, Denmark or Sweden, the outcomes in Scotland are completely different. Therefore, John Mason's argument is entirely flawed.

John Mason: We do not have time today to go into that in more detail. A lot of Scottish money has been very effective—the child payment is one example where there have been great results. I do not agree with Rachael Hamilton's point. Basically,

if you want to dual the A9 the whole way—something that we are all committed to doing—you have to know where the money is coming from.

When it comes to Scotland being competitive, we should remember that competitiveness does not simply equate to low taxes. Lots of businesses and individuals are looking for quality of life, including education facilities, the environment and other factors, as well as levels of taxation. Low taxes with poorer public services will not make Scotland attractive to very many people.

Speaking of businesses, we want Scotland to be an attractive place for businesses to start up and to grow. That is why I welcome in particular the message in today's statement that we are both anti-poverty and pro-growth. The Scottish Government is keen to support businesses as much as it can.

However, businesses have responsibilities too. Businesses do not exist purely for the owners' benefit; they are there for the good of society and the wider community. Businesses are more than welcome to make profits, but they must not make excessive profits, and if they do so, they should expect a reaction to that. In addition, businesses must pay the taxes that they are due to pay.

I do not argue that every SNP policy is perfect, but I would argue that they are a lot better than those that Labour has to offer. At least we are trying to reduce inequality with more progressive income tax, potential changes to council tax and the Scottish child payment. Meanwhile, Labour is planning to keep the two-child limit and the bedroom tax. I understand that it is also refusing to use capital gains tax or a wealth tax in order to target the excessively rich.

Personally, I am slightly disappointed that the Government is supporting safe access zones for abortion. Of course the health of women is important, but the health of unborn babies is important, too. More positively, I fully agree with the First Minister's comments on toxic masculinity, positive masculinity and the need to tackle misogyny.

In conclusion, I think that we can be extremely positive about this programme for government, which the committees will be examining over the next 10 months. Scotland can be successful under the devolution set-up, but we can be more successful once we are independent.

15:53

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I ceased to be the owner of a private rented property this summer.

This was not an energetic and fresh start from a First Minister delivering his first programme for government. This was the Government saying loud and clear that it has run out of steam, has run out of ideas and has given up—a delayed housing bill, a cladding bill that the deputy first minister wasted two years on and plans to tinker with the unfair and broken council tax. Where were the plans to empower communities? Where was the urgency to protect tenants and a commitment to get on with building the homes that Scotland needs by driving up supply in order to tackle Scotland's housing crisis?

What we are left with is Scotland being let down by two failing Governments. The Governments in Westminster and Holyrood are bad for business, bad for jobs and bad for growth. They are delivering low growth, low productivity and high levels of poverty. While the SNP and Tories are distracted by their internal problems, they have lost touch with people's reality—families are cutting back on basics, are unable to work because they cannot get the healthcare that they need and are struggling to pay spiralling bills, and people are losing their homes in record numbers.

Rent arrears are already up 75 per cent, with an eviction ban in place. Homelessness applications due to people defaulting on their mortgages are up 65 per cent. The number of children in temporary accommodation is up yet again—to record levels—and households with children are now waiting 502 days, on average, in temporary accommodation. That is a full-blown humanitarian disaster that has been created on this Government's watch, but it still refuses to accept that the housing emergency is happening right now, right out there. Is it any wonder, then, that the Government's research shows that only one in four people think that it is doing enough to help people? More than half think that it does not provide enough support.

The year-long mortgage bombshell is every bit of the Tories' making, but people absolutely need help from this Government, too. The Citizens Advice report says that the number of people looking up advice on its site on facing eviction because their home has been repossessed has soared by a massive 462 per cent this year. Those are the real fears that families face.

A year ago, Labour offered the Government a plan for a mortgage rescue scheme, and still this Government has nothing to say to the 60,000 families who are at higher risk of repossession and the 7,000 who could already be in arrears. This Government is not interested in using the powers that the Scottish Parliament has to keep people in their homes. The First Minister said that he wanted today to be about reducing poverty and delivering growth—so do we, but the news from the housing

regulator that affordable housing deliveries will fall by 15 per cent this year will do the very opposite.

Next week, I will meet Salmon Scotland, but not to talk about salmon; it will be to hear about how badly wrong the basics in the housing market are. The lack of affordable housing is stopping the Highlands and Islands from becoming a northern powerhouse, with workers able to live near their work and families, and it is causing island depopulation. If we ever needed an example of how bad for business, jobs, growth and the economy this Government is, it is the housing crisis that we are experiencing.

Kevin Stewart: I agree with Mr Griffin that we should build as many affordable homes as we can. This Government has a proud record on that, even though our capital budget has been slashed by Westminster Governments. However, does Mr Griffin recognise the failure of the previous Labour Administration, which managed during its term in office to build only six council houses in total?

Mark Griffin: Mr Stewart was a housing minister, so he surely appreciates the fact that social housing comes not just from councils but from housing associations and that the previous Labour Administration built tens and tens of thousands of social houses. That intervention is absolutely symptomatic of the spin and hypocrisy that we get from this Government. Rather than focusing on delivery and addressing the problems that Scots face today, Mr Stewart harks back to false figures from more than a decade ago.

Kevin Stewart: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Mr Griffin just said that I provided a false figure. I can guarantee for Mr Griffin that that figure of six council houses is absolutely right. All of them were built in Shetland, if he wants to know the facts. It is not a false figure at all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Stewart. It is not a point of order, but you got your point on the record.

Mark Griffin: That is clearly a false representation of the situation and of the previous Labour Government, which delivered tens and tens of thousands of social houses.

The legacy of falling approvals will hit the economy and mean fewer houses for people who are desperate for them right now.

The Government's latest idea—another woeful scrap of a policy offered to desperate councils that tinkers with the unfair, broken council tax—absolutely epitomises the Government's dearth of ambition. During a cost of living crisis, it will simultaneously hammer 80,000 low-income households, penalise pensioners on fixed incomes and hit families, which face mortgages increasing by hundreds of pounds every month. It is a policy

that is the result of the Government's failure to abolish the council tax, made worse by its failure to properly fund vital public services. Those services are the engines that run our local communities. However, like council staff, they are at breaking point, which is hurting Scotland's economy and making communities and the country poorer.

There was no personal commitment from the First Minister today that the savage decade of cuts that has cost local services over £6 billion since 2013-14 has come to an end.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Griffin is winding up.

Mark Griffin: Closing libraries and swimming pools, ending essential music programmes, slashing care packages and seeing workers go out on strike is not why any councillor went into local government. Councillors want to improve the communities that we love, not manage decline and continually cut services while charging people more for what remains.

If the First Minister wants to work in partnership and co-operation with councils to protect what is left, grow our economy and tackle poverty, he should give a commitment that the funding cuts will stop.

16:01

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Environmental justice, social justice and economic justice are not separate concepts that require separate solutions. When the injustices can often be traced back to the same root causes, the solutions must be holistic. That is the theory that underpins green politics, the Bute house agreement and the programme for government.

Despite the challenges of inflation, Brexit and the UK Government's unique combination of incompetence and outright malice, the programme for government confirms that we are building a fairer and greener economy for Scotland. Nowhere is that clearer than in the support that is given to the renewables industry.

When the Scottish Greens joined the Government, two years ago, one of the first tasks that we threw ourselves into was the reform of the national planning framework. One common point of feedback that we hear from businesses in the renewables sector, particularly in onshore wind, is that the glacial pace of the planning process has put them off developing new sites in Scotland. When NPF4 was published last year, it was described as

"a remarkable and major step forward"

by Scottish Renewables. Growth in renewables in Scotland is now happening at almost twice the rate in England. Our geography alone makes us a potential renewables powerhouse, but we cannot realise that potential without the support of national and local government. Reforming the planning process is one way in which the Scottish Government has done that. Today's confirmation of a sectoral deal for onshore wind is another way—in particular, the further improvements proposed to the planning process to halve the average time before a decision is made on section 12 applications from two years to one year.

Without the major economic levers that are still reserved to Westminster, those are the practical steps that we can take to build a greener economy for Scotland. That is also how we can build a more resilient economy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given us a hint of the instability to come in the global energy markets as a result of the climate crisis. Electrifying critical sectors, such as transport and heating, and completely decarbonising our electricity supply will insulate Scotland from what will now inevitably be deeply unstable decades to come.

Wind turbines have become the symbol of Scottish renewables, but a broad mix of sources is clearly needed. That is why the Scottish Greens were keen to ensure that the programme for government included a commitment to develop a new vision for solar. Providing certainty to businesses in that sector as well as to other potential solar providers, such as local councils, will allow the sector to flourish or at least to undo the damage and job losses of the decade lost after David Cameron's slashed support for solar back in 2012.

However, maximising the economic benefits of the transition to net zero goes beyond jobs only in generation. We all acknowledge that Scotland has not yet fully benefited from the manufacturing and wider supply chains required for the green energy revolution, so the confirmation of a new green industrial strategy is welcome. Large-scale, publicly owned energy infrastructure, in particular, is difficult to do without control over the energy market or substantial borrowing powers. However, we can use planning, licensing and other powers to maximise conditionality that ties the generating companies to maximise local supply chains and to secure a public stake in a stable and reliable long-term investment opportunity.

The fair work conditions that have been attached to public procurement contracts and grants as a result of the Scottish Greens' co-operation agreement are already ensuring that the wages of some of the lowest-paid workers are boosted to at least the real living wage. That will

be strengthened further by the sectoral fair work agreements that have been announced today.

The single most effective force for boosting workers' wages is workers themselves, organised through their trade unions. Using sectoral fair work agreements to expand sectoral bargaining and boost trade union membership will create a fairer and more prosperous economy, as would giving workers direct control over their businesses by growing the number of co-operatives. The review of the support that is provided to co-ops and social enterprises gives another opportunity not only to empower workers but to make our economy more resilient through local ownership and reinvestment of profits in the real economy.

Workers will benefit from other Scottish Green policies, such as the removal of peak-time rail fares from next month and the pilot programme for the four-day working week. I can attest from the experience of our party and parliamentary group staff that the four-day working week can absolutely result not just in no loss of productivity but in productivity gains, because staff are happier and more motivated as a result of a better work-life balance.

Removing peak-time rail fares will not just help families through the cost of living crisis; it will have wider economic benefits, particularly in areas that are experiencing labour shortages because it is currently not worth the money, as a result of travel costs, for potential workers from slightly further away to fill gaps in the local workforce.

This morning, Anas Sarwar talked about green extremism—I presume that the line was drafted for him by his bosses in London. I will recap what that green extremism is delivering and contrast it with Labour's offer.

In government with our SNP colleagues, we are lifting 90,000 children out of poverty through policies such as the Scottish child payment and mitigation of the Tories' cruel benefit cap. On the other hand, Labour will not support removing that cap or even abolishing the two-child cap and the rape clause.

In recognition of the fact that 2,000 to 3,000 people who are disproportionately poorer and disabled die prematurely every year in Scotland because of air pollution, we are delivering low-emission zones in our city centres. As it is desperate for the support of *Daily Mail* columnists, Labour has abandoned its previous support for low-emission zones.

We are honest enough to say that lifting children out of poverty and tackling the climate crisis require those with the broadest shoulders to pay a bit more. On the other hand, Labour thinks that the tax rates that the UK Tory Government has set are fine and, according to its shadow chancellor,

Labour cannot think of anything that it would spend increased tax revenues on, although more than 4 million children in the UK live in poverty.

If lifting children out of poverty, tackling the climate emergency and telling the wealthiest that they have to pay their fair share is extremism, the Scottish Greens are guilty as charged. We are proud to have played our part in a programme for government that will make Scotland a fairer and greener nation.

16:07

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Soaring inflation and the cost of living crisis, which are both fuelled by Westminster, continue to cut to the bone across too many of the communities that I represent. It is in that context—with rising food prices and eye-watering energy prices—that our Scottish Government must do what it has always had to do.

We will continue to respond to help the nation get through the Westminster-fuelled cost of living crisis as well as to build our own strong track record and vision. Scrapping the income threshold for best start foods is a sensible and welcome example of that—it will help a further 20,000 pregnant mums and children up to the age of three, on top of the 44,460 people who received the benefit last year. I know how the best start foods programme and its sister payment, the best start grant, have benefited my constituents, so the extension is warmly welcome, as is the on-going commitment to the Scottish child payment, which is delivered to 316,000 children in the poorest families across Scotland.

I see at first hand the substantial difference that the Scottish child payment makes. For many families, describing that as substantial does not cut it. I know from many private conversations that I have had with several families that the payment is a lifeline right now. It provides an additional £100 per child every four weeks, and such a payment does not exist anywhere else in the UK. In reality, it is a vital mitigation against a UK Government welfare system that penalises rather than supports children or families who are on the lowest incomes.

I do not understand why Labour would wed itself to that welfare system if it were ever in government at Westminster. Scotland's child payment, which is worth £1,300 a year per child, improves the lives of hundreds of thousands of children and has prevented 90,000 children from falling into poverty.

Where Westminster policies are driving poverty, the Scottish Government is taking action to help families. Our approach to helping families is well illustrated today, with very welcome

announcements on childcare. It is vital that we continue to roll out childcare provision. I note that 69 per cent of children in poverty live in working households. Extending provision to those households will not only tackle poverty but boost our economy. Therefore, it is very welcome to hear that six early adopter councils will extend free childcare for babies as young as nine months old up to school age. Clearly, I would wish Glasgow to benefit from that.

I welcome that the extension of the provision of childcare to two-year-olds, which offers parents flexibility in accessing childcare, will be accelerated. The programme seeks to boost the number of childminders by 1,000. They are facing a real challenge right now, so that will be welcome. It will also increase pay for staff in the private, voluntary and independent childcare sectors to at least £12 an hour. All that is welcome. However, I would like to hear more about expanding the affordable breakfast club programme and after-school provision for school-aged children. I pay tribute to the fantastic breakfast club at St Blane's primary school, which my seven-year-old benefits from, and, the excellent after-school care provision that Summerston Childcare offers. However, such provision must be extended to as many people as possible.

The programme for government builds on our social care commitments. It is hugely positive to hear today that our social care staff will receive another well-deserved pay award. The announcement of a 10 per cent uplift to ensure that at least £12 an hour is paid to staff in direct care roles is worth £2,000 a year for full-time staff. That has been a while coming, but it is essential that we deliver on pay to that sector, and we must continue to do so.

I also welcome moves in the programme for government to protect further those struggling in their tenancies. I welcome the extension of the rent cap to the end of March 2024, plans to implement rent controls and plans to invest to reduce the reliance on temporary accommodation for those experiencing homelessness. We are well aware of those issues. I also welcome the headline commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032.

The programme builds on vital Scottish Government work. Let us not forget that that includes the on-going mitigation of the UK Government's bedroom tax. The tax was brought in by Labour and rolled out by the Conservatives. The Scottish Government does all that it can to ensure that renters can afford to stay in their own homes, despite the bedroom tax. That mitigation costs us £84 million each and every year. Another £400 million is spent on the Scottish child payment

mitigating a UK benefit system that does not adequately support our children.

In total, the Scottish Government spends £3 billion each year trying to limit the damage that Westminster causes, whichever party is in government. Just think what more we could do if we did not have to mitigate. Unfortunately, a whirlwind of UK Labour U-turns by Sir Keir Starmer means the need to mitigate Westminster decisions will continue to drain Scotland's budget, irrespective of whether we have blue or red Tories at Downing Street. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I thought that Labour members would feel deeply uncomfortable about that. They should feel ashamed.

Despite the ever-increasing financial constraints that are placed on our Scottish Government as a consequence of mitigations, I am pleased to see in the programme for government several welcome progressive steps, which I am happy to commend to members.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Thank you, Mr Doris. I call Donald Cameron, to be followed by Sarah Boyack.

I ask that we have less chat across the front benches from sedentary positions, please.

16:13

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands (Con): I, too, acknowledge that the First Minister has delivered his first programme for government and that, although the Scottish Conservatives will robustly scrutinise the legislative agenda for the year, we will provide constructive support where possible.

I welcome the pro-growth agenda that the First Minister says is a key focus of this programme for government, but it remains to be seen whether he will deliver on that, given the years of sluggish growth that Scotland has recently experienced. It will not be a surprise to him that the Conservatives strongly believe that there must be a renewed focus on economic growth, as Douglas Ross spoke about last week, instead of the damaging obsession with independence that this Government has previously shown.

More than £1.4 million has been spent on civil servant time on the production of the Scottish Government's independence papers. However, as the First Minister put it during the SNP leadership contest, they are papers that sit

"on a website and nobody reads."

Kevin Stewart: Will Donald Cameron give way?

Donald Cameron: Not yet.

It is essential that the First Minister uses his first full year in charge to get Scotland's economy moving forward again.

I will focus my remarks on the Government's plans for Scotland's cultural and heritage sectors, both of which have borne the brunt of the pandemic as well as deep cuts in recent years. It is disappointing that there is so little emphasis on them in the programme for government because, aside from announcements about a series of new strategies—well-intentioned, no doubt—there is little in the document that will give the culture and heritage sectors confidence that their cries for help have been heard.

I sense a real feeling of neglect about those sectors. That comes on a day that the Edinburgh International Festival lamented the Scottish Government's approach to cultural spending and made the excoriating claim that

"the last time"

that the sector was

"able to be competitive and ambitious, rather than managing decline, was 2008".

It is clear that warm words will not cut it. Research that was published earlier this year by the Scottish Parliament information centre highlighted the level of funding cuts across the culture sector over many years, including a real-terms cut to Creative Scotland's budget since 2018-19 and real-terms cuts to Scotland's national performing companies.

John Swinney: I understand the significance of the points that Mr Cameron makes. Indeed, in my short last tenure as finance secretary, I responded to a significant request from the King's theatre in Edinburgh for Government funding to complete its restoration programme, which I am delighted that we were able to take forward. However, does Mr Cameron not understand the irony of the contrast between the remarks that he makes about the constraints on the public finances and the approach to public expenditure that the Government that he supports in the United Kingdom has taken for the past 13 years? I know that he looks at the issues carefully, but does he not identify the irony of asking us to spend more money when he supports a United Kingdom Government that puts in place a fiscal framework that constrains the Scottish Government's expenditure?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Donald Cameron, I will give you back some time.

Donald Cameron: The short answer to Mr Swinney is that the block grant funding for the Scottish Government is the highest since devolution began, at around £41 billion for 2022 to 2025. That means that, for every £100 per person

that the UK Government spends in England on matters devolved to Scotland, the Scottish Government receives around £126 per person. It is about choices.

As well as having a devastating impact on national organisations, the funding situation has a significant effect on the many grass-roots local arts and culture groups across Scotland that face an uncertain future.

The effect of all that was highlighted perfectly by Karen Anderson, who is chair of Workshop and Artists Studio Provision (Scotland) Ltd—a crucial organisation that provides studios throughout Scotland. She cited the Scottish Government's performance indicators on arts and said that they showed a year-on-year decrease of the gross value added of £79 million in real terms between 2019 and 2020. She also said that employment numbers in Scotland's arts, culture and creative industries were down by 10,000 on 2021. Undoubtedly the pandemic has something to do with that, but Karen Anderson summed it up by stating that Scotland faces a "cultural recession". There was never a greater warning about the future of Scotland's cultural sector than that. The First Minister must show leadership and face that challenge head on. Otherwise, the long-term impact will be irreversible.

It is not only the culture sector that faces an uncertain future: Scotland's heritage sector continues to face challenges. Nowhere is that more the case than at our historical sites.

It is of course welcome that Historic Environment Scotland now receives more money than in previous years but that has not resulted in more of Scotland's closed historical sites reopening to the public. The number of HES-managed sites that are completely closed or subject to restrictions has rocketed over the past year from 60 to 90. That means that almost one third of Scotland's historical sites are impacted, which has a damaging effect on tourism, causes knock-on reverberations in local business and harms our international reputation as a prime tourist destination, discouraging visitors to rural Scotland in particular.

In conclusion, Scotland's arts, culture and heritage sector faces a number of distinct and unique challenges that are born from years of underfunding. Although the programme for government acknowledges some of those issues, it does little to inspire confidence that the First Minister realises the problems to hand and that he has a plan to address them. Decisive action must be taken to ensure that Scotland remains a leading nation in arts, culture and heritage, and the Scottish Conservatives will play our part in making sure that that happens.

16:20

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The programme for government serves as a reminder of all the things that have not happened or that have got worse over the past 16 years. Before today, we were briefed that the programme for government would take action on climate change, so we responded positively to the story at the weekend that the First Minister was planning a round-table meeting with party leaders to work together to tackle the climate crisis. Today, however, the First Minister said that other parties are “abdicating their responsibilities” on climate change. That is a bit rich, given that, just prior to recess, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition informed Parliament that Scotland missed the 2021 greenhouse gas emission reduction target.

We urgently need the Scottish Government to make much more progress on delivery. Audit Scotland and the UK Climate Change Committee have highlighted the lack of progress on delivering on climate targets for homes and buildings, transport and land, so we need action.

I want to respond to the First Minister’s point. On oil and gas, the Scottish National Party has been all over the place. In January, the Scottish Government’s “Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan” confirmed that the Government was

“consulting on whether ... there should be a presumption against new exploration for oil and gas.”

When Labour set out our ambitious proposals to sprint to clean energy and deliver the climate leadership that we urgently need with our green prosperity plan, the Minister for Energy and the Environment accused us of turning off the taps. In the wake of the UK Government announcement at the end of July on oil and gas licences, the First Minister said that the UK Government was not taking climate change seriously. He said:

“The Scottish Government continues to believe in an accelerated Just Transition. Our future is not in unlimited extraction of oil & gas.”

This week, the energy minister called for a “nuanced approach” on oil and gas licences. That is all over the place, but it is just one example of the lack of bold climate leadership and, critically, the lack of the delivery that we urgently need from the Government.

If we add in the cost of living crisis—

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants’ Rights (Patrick Harvie): Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, but that was well timed, minister.

If we add in the cost of living crisis and last year’s shocking £133 million underspend on retrofitting, it is absolutely clear that the Scottish Government has lost all credibility when it comes to being a leader in tackling climate change, particularly during that crisis. Although the First Minister talked in his statement about tackling poverty, the Government is not doing the heavy lifting to ensure that, across the country, we have investment to deliver the affordable warm homes that people urgently need. The Scottish Government estimates that, this year, nearly 1 million households—technically, 980,000 households—which is 39 per cent of Scotland’s households, will be in fuel poverty.

We urgently need action, but today we heard about nothing that will begin to tackle the challenge. It does not need to be like this.

Patrick Harvie: It is clear that the Government is already doing far more than Governments in other parts of the UK on the financial support that people need to retrofit their homes. Will the member commit her party to supporting us and working with us on a heat in buildings bill, or does she share her party leader’s attachment to the rhetoric on green extremism?

Sarah Boyack: The whole point is that the approach needs to be practical and it needs to tackle the cost of living crisis. The problem that we have is that the two Governments are not talking to each other and are falling out when it suits them, but they are not delivering the policy.

A comment was made earlier about community energy. I strongly support that approach, but local government has been absolutely cash-strapped for 16 years, and it is critical in delivering the projects that Patrick Harvie is talking about. If we want to see community heat and power networks and to deliver co-operative opportunities in Scotland, we need to work with our councils, and they need to have in place the planners and the people to do risk assessments.

Crucially, we need to join up the work, which is not happening. It is practical, and we know that it works when it happens in other countries, but it is not happening here. As Anas Sarwar said, we urgently need to change what is happening. Businesses in particular urgently need action, because they are committed to investing in innovative low-carbon technologies but are not getting the support from the Scottish Government or the UK Government. Although I very much welcome the announcement of a green industrial strategy, businesses have been waiting for far too long. We need to see plans for the infrastructure that urgently needs to be built, and we need the Government to use its powers in relation to green manufacturing, support for supply chains, and

training and upskilling for those who have vital experience.

As Anas Sarwar said, Labour offers a credible alternative. We led the way when we were in power. With our green prosperity plan, we would cut energy bills by up to £1,400 a year. There would be joined-up thinking and bold and radical action. The plan would also save businesses across the UK £53 billion in their energy bills up to 2030. In Scotland, we urgently need more jobs in clean power. Our plans would create 50,000 jobs, and there would be a further 17,000 jobs for plumbers, installers and construction workers to upgrade our homes and buildings.

To implement Patrick Harvie's aspirations, we need to do the heavy lifting. We need to be bold and radical, and our workers and communities need to benefit from a just transition through locally owned heat and power networks. The SNP has given up on the public sector, but we would establish GB Energy—a publicly owned energy company that would generate energy, work to unlock our green energy potential, create jobs across Scotland and the UK and get critical supply chains in place. We urgently need joined-up thinking in order to tackle our climate crisis and transform people's lives.

I am interested in hearing from the Deputy First Minister. I have been consulting on my proposed member's bill on wellbeing and sustainable development. We know from Wales that its Future Generations Commissioner has made a huge difference, so I hope that the Scottish Government will support my bill.

Extreme weather is becoming more frequent, and there are disastrous health and economic impacts across the world, so we need to tackle climate change. We need action now, not just warm words.

16:27

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As others were in their constituencies, I was out and about in my Edinburgh Northern and Leith constituency over the summer months. There is a lot to be optimistic about, but there is also a lot to worry about.

As others have articulated, the challenges for households are real and significant. There is deep inequality in our country, particularly when it comes to income. It is worth reminding ourselves that, in the UK, which is one of the richest countries in the world, about 40 per cent of total disposable household income goes to the fifth of individuals with the highest incomes, while less than 10 per cent goes to the fifth with the lowest incomes. That is where we are, so it is no wonder that, in such a scenario, there is anger and

anxiety. Our collective challenge is to make sure that that does not turn to apathy and that hardship does not turn to hopelessness.

The UK is a poor society with some very rich people. During these challenging times in this country, our constituents are looking to us all for support, security and positive direction—a Government that is on their side. Many of the challenging circumstances that we face with our public finances have been created by Westminster Governments and through policy decisions outwith our control, so, given all those challenges, the leadership that the First Minister has shown today is admirable. He has set out what I believe is a progressive and appropriate programme for government in these times.

I could touch on so many things that will make a difference in my constituency and elsewhere, but I will focus on just a few. First, there is the commitment to increases in public sector pay. Today, we have heard that there will be at least a 10 per cent increase in pay for our important social care workers. Increases in public sector pay not only make sure that services are sustained and kept running during these challenging times, which is not happening elsewhere; they also have a positive multiplier effect on reducing income inequality and providing stimulus in our economy.

I congratulate the Government on its social security commitments, of which there are several. As the Minister for Social Security and Local Government, I was proud to work on the removal of the income threshold for the best start foods payment, and I am glad that that has progressed.

I was also proud to work on the delivery of the Scottish child payment, and I am pleased to see another £400 million-plus investment in that. Let us all remember, as Professor Danny Dorling reminded audiences in Edinburgh in the summer months, that the Scottish child payment is not only the most innovative and important anti-poverty measure in the whole of the UK but a measure that is mitigating an underfunded universal credit system. It is required because the welfare state at UK level is not adequate. The point that I put to those who seek to be in government at UK level next year is that, if they are not prepared to do more with the social security system, they should devolve more of it and let us get on with it. The same goes for taxation: if they are not prepared to do things with capital gains tax for a society as unequal as ours, they should give this Parliament the powers and we will use them for the common good.

That brings me to the measures that will be taken to expand childcare provision and support small businesses. Most of the problems in my constituency—this will be the same for many members in the chamber—relate to in-work

poverty. Think about the difference that we could make if we had powers in this Parliament over employment law. Again, if those who seek to be in government in Westminster are not prepared to use those powers, they should devolve them and we will make a bigger difference with them here.

The last important area of challenge that I will touch on is housing. Colleagues will know that I am the representative of Edinburgh Northern and Leith in our capital. The pressures on our housing system in Edinburgh are really significant. Shelter has called it an emergency, and I would certainly call it a crisis. The actions that will be in the housing bill to moderate rents are welcome. Actions include duties to prevent homelessness, which is particularly welcome because there has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of homelessness applications.

I note that the Government has said that, in the year ahead, it will invest £750 million through the affordable housing supply programme. As important as it is to invest in other places—and I note the points about rural areas—I ask that any projects in Edinburgh that can be prioritised are prioritised, and, if there is any additional initiative that can be undertaken with the City of Edinburgh Council, let us look at it collaboratively, because we really need to take action on the serious situation that we face in the capital.

We are in a new parliamentary term. As each of us walked through the doors to the chamber, I hope that we felt our privilege again. It is an honour to be here; it is a serious place, and, as one of the Opposition members said, we must rise to the big challenges.

The Scottish Government has set out its prospectus. It is robust and realistic, but it is also ambitious. People out there want us to be constructive. They know how serious these times are. Let us therefore scrutinise but not sensationalise, as has been done this afternoon. Let us exchange ideas but not exaggerate conflict when it is not there. There is so much work to be done, so let us get on with it for the common good and the benefit of all our constituents.

16:33

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close for Labour in what has been—typically and rightly—a robust debate, because it is a difficult time for so many of the people who we are elected to represent.

In speaking to the good people of Dundee and those in the north-east more broadly, and when knocking doors in Rutherglen and Hamilton West in these past few weeks, I have found that people do not wait for 22 minutes to mention our NHS crisis. The first things that people mention on

doorsteps across Scotland are the NHS crisis and the cost of living crisis. Wives, daughters, husbands and sons are adrift on waiting lists. Cancer diagnoses are delayed; lives are lost or changed for ever. Waiting lists are soaring to unheard-of heights. Access to GPs is collapsing. NHS dentistry is little more than a myth to more and more people.

There is no real recovery, no real plan and no real hope. That is what a real leader would have offered today. When nothing works as it should, people are desperate for hope and change.

Increasingly often, the pay packet is gone long before the end of the week. Bills continue to rise and everyone, everywhere is paying the price of Tory economic incompetence. Anyone who watched Jeremy Hunt's recent appearance on the Laura Kuennsberg show saw him say that cutting inflation from 10 per cent to 5 per cent would put 5p in every pound back in people's pockets. Really? The real life Chancellor of the Exchequer is utterly clueless about what inflation actually is, let alone how to deal with it. The sooner we can have a general election and get that shower out of power, the better.

After 16 years in government, the First Minister is now attempting to feign an interest in the economy. The fact that his predecessor showed no interest whatsoever means that he inherits a toxic legacy. Back in the spring, before we all went off on recess, the wellbeing economy was the answer, but there was not a single mention of that in the First Minister's speech. He is interested in economic growth in the same way that I am interested in Dundee United winning the champions league: it would be a good thing, but I do not have the faintest idea how it could ever happen.

The First Minister said that he was "unashamedly" pro growth, but there was absolutely nothing in his speech about how that would ever happen. There was no plan whatsoever and nothing at all to say what he would do to make that growth appear. Wishing will not make it true: we need a plan that is based on substance.

Ross Greer: I wonder whether Mr Marra missed the part of the First Minister's speech in which he announced the new sectoral deal for wind and the planning reforms that will take us from having a rate of growth in renewables that is twice that in England to one that is far beyond that. Did Mr Marra miss the bit where the First Minister outlined specific plans to grow our renewables industry?

Michael Marra: Those plans will be turbocharged when we have a publicly owned energy company for the UK that is based in Scotland and can deliver real jobs. That was

promised by this Government years ago, but nothing happened to deliver it.

There was a fleeting mention in the First Minister's speech of Scotland's outstanding universities and their role in the economy, but the SNP-Green approach to leadership in those universities has been described by the sector as one of managing decline. There was a single mention of our colleges at a time when further education staff are facing compulsory redundancies and Audit Scotland is damning about this Government's failure to provide any leadership on skills.

Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly raised the issue of the crumbling concrete in our schools, which is worrying parents across Scotland. We heard the cabinet secretary attempting earlier to disassociate that problem from the long-delayed school upgrade programme, which was a not-at-all credible answer to a serious question.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to Michael Marra for recognising my remarks in his speech. Does he agree that the problematic concrete is not limited to our school estate but is also being found in our hospitals, creating the far more serious problem of what to do with patients who may be on wards where there is problem concrete?

Michael Marra: That is a fair point and well made. These problems extend across Scotland's public estate and we recognise that it will be a significant financial challenge for the Scottish Government to intervene. We need full disclosure, and as soon as possible, of where that material has been used and the challenges that it causes.

John Swinney: Will the member accept an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

Refusing to answer questions about the issue, as Dundee City Council has done in my area, is untenable. There are serious questions that need answers from the Government and from our local authorities.

John Swinney raised the issue of the SNP Government's investment in childcare. Just yesterday, Paul O'Kane MSP led a Labour round-table meeting of anti-poverty organisations that stressed the lack of access for poorer families and the need to increase action in that regard. I say to Mr Swinney that, from my reading of the programme for government, there are some signs of amendments to the programme that might begin to deal with some of those problems with access. I hope that he recognises that the challenge is recognised by anti-poverty organisations and that we need to see change to make sure that that happens. We need to get that right, and flexibility is key. The ability of a parent to take an extra shift

in a supermarket or any place of work is critical if we are going to deal with issues of poverty.

John Swinney: Will Mr Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir. I am running out of time.

There has also been coverage of justice issues. The First Minister wants to trial body-worn cameras at a time when, in the north-east of Scotland, we are trialling not investigating crimes at all.

The key is that, when in power, you have to act, but we all know the political test that was set for the First Minister by his own admission today: it was necessary to take the chance to define his leadership as something other than chaos and incompetence. What would be new? What would show that the Government had risen to the moment?

Is the problem with today's relaunch not, perhaps, that the problems that it seeks to fix bear the clown's footprints of the First Minister's ministerial path to date? When it comes to the broken transport system, the broken justice system and the broken NHS, the truth is that the guy who broke it cannot fix it. He may have received the dreaded vote of confidence from his back benchers today, but they all know that, in reality, the writing is on the wall. How many more bad results can he withstand? Today's performance has done nothing to change the mood. Far more important, it does nowhere near enough to improve the lives of the people of Scotland, who are crying out for change.

16:41

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is our privilege to live in Scotland—a country that is rich in its natural resources, its landscapes and the talent of its people. We are currently world leading in some aspects of research and economic development, but we all know only too well that Scotland is nowhere near turning her full potential into a reality—such is the extent of the economic challenges that face us.

Just a cursory look at the Scottish Fiscal Commission's most recent statistics and the analyses of numerous independent economic groups tells us the very gloomy prognosis, which is that Scotland is facing long-term fiscal instability, with persistent large black holes in the public finances. We have a serious demographic imbalance that means that our working population as a percentage of the total population is declining faster than is the case in other economies. Our productivity and growth are both weak, and we have nothing like the money that is required to pay

for the spending projected for the foreseeable future. The relevant statistics in that regard are set out at almost every evidence session of Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee—today's meeting included—to the extent that the status quo is simply not an option.

What is required is not just a change to the policy focus, but a radical change to the structure of the economy and its accompanying structures of Government expenditure and taxation. To pretend otherwise is irresponsible, but it is also deeply damaging to our country.

The First Minister said that there is a relentless focus on growth. I say to him that he needs to sit down with his coalition partners and tell them that because, for them, economic growth does not seem to matter. If he does not have economic growth, he will not be able to do all the things that are being suggested for the wellbeing of the economy.

Last week, Douglas Ross set out our prospectus for growth, with measures that we believe can bring about the right environment in which business and industry can flourish. They are measures that business and industry have said they want to be put in place in order to develop an interconnected and coherent infrastructure, and an environment in which we can make the very best use of people's talents and skills—more of which in just a minute.

However, the public and businesses are also telling us that they want a tax structure that is aligned with that of the rest of the UK so that Scotland does not lose her competitive advantage, and that they want a tax system that is designed to retain and attract skilled working people, improve productivity and maximise the potential for growth. What they do not want is a Scottish Government that is hell bent on making sure that Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the UK, whether that is done by increasing income tax on middle and higher earners or threatening large hikes in council tax.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: I will give way in just a minute.

It is interesting that the Labour Party has now changed its tune on that. It is because, I presume, it has finally recognised that, if we do not get economic growth and better public services, higher taxes will not work.

John Mason: Does Liz Smith accept that not just lower taxes but the quality of education, the environment, the world-class universities and many other factors attract people and businesses to Scotland?

Liz Smith: John Mason is right: it is not just about tax. However, I am sure that he has spoken

to businesses in his Glasgow constituency. All of them tell us that a big part of the fact that Scotland is no longer as competitive as it should be is that it is the highest-taxed part of the UK. That is serious.

We also desperately need a tax structure that delivers much better public services. When people pay more, they do not want to get less. In effect, that is what is happening. We need a tax structure that delivers much greater transparency. That very strong message has come from Audit Scotland over many years.

That brings me to our demographic imbalance and the resulting effects on productivity and tax revenues. No country in the world is immune to those demographic pressures, but Scotland's circumstances are worse because the size of the working population in relation to the total population is declining at a faster rate. The Scottish Fiscal Commission tells us that, over the next 50 years, Scotland's population could fall by around 400,000 as a result of the lower birth rate.

Kevin Stewart: Will Liz Smith give way?

Liz Smith: I will not just now, if Kevin Stewart does not mind.

In addition, the percentage of people over the age of 65 will increase from 21 per cent, where it is now, to 31 per cent in 2072.

As Professor James Mitchell has said, we have higher levels of taxation but less money to spend on public services because the performance of the Scottish economy is weaker than that of economies elsewhere.

To make matters worse, a higher percentage of people are remote from the workforce, and large numbers of people have taken themselves out of the workforce since Covid. Those people have skills that we highly value and desperately need. That is another reason to focus on policies that will encourage people back to the labour market. I welcome the childcare policy.

Ross Greer: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will not, if Ross Greer does not mind, because I have a lot to conclude on.

For example, how ridiculous is it that the current funding position in higher education is skewed against that idea? For example, Scotland-domiciled people desperately want to take up university places to study medicine, but they cannot get in because of the intense competition from foreign students who pay extra fees, which makes them a more attractive financial proposition for our struggling—

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): That is rubbish.

Liz Smith: No, it is not rubbish. It is absolutely true. If we listen to Universities Scotland and many of the people who work in universities, we will hear that it is absolutely true. The trouble is that, particularly in relation to medicine, people go elsewhere and never come back to Scotland. We need those people and their skills, because they are highly valued.

I am attracted by what people such as James Withers and Sandy Begbie have said—most especially, about the need for a much more holistic approach to skills and training that is bought into by schools, colleges, universities and businesses, and for a system that values skills across the diversity of the population and which values every institution—wherever and whatever it might be—that delivers that training.

Another aspect of the Withers report is the reflection on the need for a change in the culture that is to deliver public sector reform, which is something that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been concentrating on for a considerable number of weeks. He is clear that the problem is not the complexity of the change but the lack of clarity and direction regarding Government policy. As a result, too many public sector bodies are working in silos without giving due regard to the bigger picture.

It is my firm belief that establishing a sustainable financial position for Scotland absolutely has to be the top priority—exactly as it is for the Finance and Public Administration Committee of the Parliament. I repeat that the current position is simply not an option, because it fails to deliver when it comes to making best use of our precious resources. It fails to deliver better productivity, the right environment for growth, higher tax revenues or best use of our best resource—our people.

To continue with the current structures in the economy is to fail to address the very serious concerns that have been set out by the Parliament. We desperately need a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in business and industry, but we also desperately need that in the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister, Shona Robison, to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:50

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): This year's programme for government shows how the Scottish Government will continue to support people and communities across Scotland to thrive and live more positive lives in a fairer, more equal society.

The current financial situation is challenging. It is challenging for households, business and, as many have said, the wider public finances. I know that this is a worrying time for many. Within that context, the Government has published an ambitious anti-poverty, pro-growth programme for government that will support Scotland's progress towards the fairer, wealthier and greener Scotland that we want to see.

As the First Minister stated earlier, this Government will always support the people of Scotland to succeed, particularly when times are difficult. This programme for government demonstrates our commitment to prioritising the provision of support to those who need it most, and we will use every power at our disposal to protect the vulnerable in our society and to build strong, cohesive and vibrant communities.

I want to turn to some of the points that members have made. I will touch only briefly on Douglas Ross's points, because there was nothing much new in what he was saying. He talked down our education system, despite the record numbers of young people entering our higher education system, particularly from poorer backgrounds. He also complained about the lack of affordable homes, despite opposing every measure to stem the loss of affordable homes, such as the action taken on short-term lets and second homes. Then he talked about his bold economic plan, which really equals tax cuts.

John Swinney was absolutely right to point out that, on the anniversary of Liz Truss being elected into Government, which was followed by her disastrous mini-budget, those lessons of Trussonomics have not been learned and what we are seeing is Rossonomics, with the bells and whistles of a tax-cutting agenda that will cut public finances. With the Truss Government, we saw not just the impact on the public finances that we are still feeling now, but the impact on households' finances. The idea that Douglas Ross can put forward that proposition in the light of all that evidence seems to me to be quite astonishing.

Douglas Ross: If the cabinet secretary would go back to what I was discussing in my speech, she would see that I made a very direct plea to the First Minister to answer a point in the programme for government. He has promised that his Government, of which the cabinet secretary is the Deputy First Minister, will dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness. When will that happen?

Shona Robison: The First Minister confirmed today that we have launched the procurement for the Tomatin to Moy section as the next step in that work. One would have thought that that was something that Douglas Ross would have welcomed. We will make further announcements about the rest of the A9 dualling in due course.

I want to turn to Anas Sarwar.

Kevin Stewart: Before the Deputy First Minister turns to Anas Sarwar, I would like to point out that Douglas Ross pleaded for us all to support his right to recovery bill—a bill that has still not been published. That seems to not really be a priority for the Conservatives, because their website clearly shows that the right to recovery section has not been updated since 1 September 2021. Will the DFM comment on that?

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It is important that the chamber has all the facts. I have been going through the non-Government bills unit, and I am very grateful that it has now appointed Brodies as the drafters. I can only go as quick as that process. What would speed it up would be for the Scottish Government to say that it will back the bill 100 per cent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not a point of order, of course, but the member has made his point.

Shona Robison: In the spirit of trying to be helpful, as a number of ministers and the First Minister himself have said to Douglas Ross, we want to work with members from across the chamber to tackle a serious issue, but we need to see the bill. When we see the bill, we will address the issue of whether there are elements in it that we can take forward. I will leave that there.

I turn to Anas Sarwar. I might be a bit old-fashioned, but I think that we should wait to see the results of by-elections before declaring victory in them. It does a great disservice to the people of Rutherglen to do otherwise.

Anas Sarwar said that the Government focuses too much on social policy. We make no apology for focusing on social policy that has lifted 90,000 children out of poverty. We heard a number of speeches from Labour members about how we need to do more and go faster, but Anas Sarwar wants to keep the bedroom tax and the two-child limit, and he wants to make the rape clause fairer. He wants to turn his back on progressive taxation and back off from environmental policies. How does any of that help to address either poverty or the environmental crisis that is facing the planet? The truth is that Labour has no answers to anything, other than a desperate hope that the Tories' incompetence at Westminster will let it into office without it making any promises or holding out any prospect of real change. That is the truth, and Anas Sarwar will say and do anything to try to open that door. That is not about principle—it is about ditching principles to try to win an election, so let us just call it what it is.

However, we will not have Labour members coming here as part of the budget process and turning their backs on wanting to raise any

revenue while making myriad calls for spending priorities such as those that we have heard today, because you cannot have spending priorities and want to spend more money without having the money to allocate to those spending priorities. We will not hear any of that from Labour.

Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about the important issue of RAAC. In her answer to today's topical question, Shirley-Anne Somerville made clear the action that is being taken on RAAC and the seriousness with which we take the issue, which we have been working on for many months. If Alex Cole-Hamilton wants to meet to get a more detailed briefing on what is being done behind the scenes and the information that is being gathered from stakeholders, particularly local government, I am sure that Shirley-Anne Somerville will do that.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for taking my intervention and I would certainly welcome a meeting with the cabinet secretary. However, if the Government has been working on the problem concrete for so many months, I am anxious that the first time it was raised in the Parliament, it was raised by an Opposition leader. Why has the Parliament not been informed of the threat to public safety?

Shona Robison: We have been following the guidance of the Institution of Structural Engineers, doing the risk assessments and working with partners. There is nothing to hide here. We are all trying to work together through a very difficult challenge. Of course we will keep the Parliament updated as we gather information. We should be trying to reassure people, and I am sure that Alex Cole-Hamilton will want to join us in doing that.

John Swinney was right to talk about the key issue of childcare and its important role in boosting economic growth. It is a single intervention that can tackle poverty and help parents to get back into work and to secure more hours and more secure employment. It is absolutely vital, and it is at the heart of this programme for government. It builds on the work that we have done to support the 30 per cent of the poorest families, who are better off by £2,000 a year because of the choices of this Government.

Therefore, to those who say that there is nothing in the programme for government to tackle poverty, I say that the facts do not support that proposition. We have shown by our actions where our priorities lie. Yes, it is about social policy and addressing social inequality, but it is also about economic growth. On that point, Rachael Hamilton talked about R100, which is a really important part of our investment in our infrastructure. Despite telecoms legislation being wholly reserved, we are investing £600 million in R100 to make that change happen.

Affordable housing is critical, not just in tackling poverty but for boosting economic growth. We will invest £750 million to support the delivery of affordable homes. We have already delivered 110,000 affordable homes, and we will deliver another 110,000 by 2032, so we have a good record on affordable housing to report on. We will also invest £60 million of that to acquire empty properties to use as affordable homes.

Ross Greer was absolutely right about fair work principles attached to grants and contracts. The sectoral fair work agreements that were announced in today's programme for government build on that, which is hugely important.

I end on a point that Liz Smith made. She made a number of important points, as she often does—she is one of the more constructive Conservative members. I know that it is quite a low bar, but she definitely is. She talked about the challenge in the public finances. She is absolutely right, and we will of course continue to set out how we will meet that challenge—not helped, incidentally, by the real-terms cut in both resource and capital budgets that is coming next year.

With regard to the medium-term financial strategy, we absolutely need to take action. Part of that is about reform, and part of it is about modelling the needs of the public sector over the next 10 years to ensure that it delivers in a way that is efficient and that meets the people's priorities. We will do that, and if we can get support from members across the chamber to do so, we will.

On tax, I am chairing the tax strategy group, working with experts to ensure that we land in the space of having a tax system that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Deputy First Minister, I need you to conclude.

Shona Robison: —is progressive and fair.

I end on this note of consensus. I am keen to work with any member across the chamber. In tough times, we do not have all the answers, and we want to work across the chamber. Where there are good ideas and suggestions, we will listen to them, but what we will not do is have Scotland, and our public services, talked down. We will continue to invest record levels of investment in our public services, because the people of Scotland deserve and expect nothing less than that.

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. During the debate earlier this afternoon, Mr Ross stated that he had mentioned Mr Matheson

“because he has refused to meet with ... campaigners”

on the issue of GPs

“in my local area”

and said that he had to write to him “several times” on the matter.

As Mr Ross says, it is important that the chamber has all the facts on these matters. I was due to meet with the campaign group to which Mr Ross referred at 2.30 this afternoon. In fact, Mr Ross was actually invited to attend that meeting, but unfortunately, because of parliamentary business for which we both had to be in the chamber, the meeting had to be cancelled last week.

As a result, my office actually extended two further dates over the next two weeks to meet with that campaign group and for Mr Ross to be able to attend that meeting. It is very clear that the comment made by Mr Ross that I had refused to meet with the campaign group is inaccurate and is misleading the chamber.

Given the need to ensure that comments that are made by members in the chamber are accurate, can you advise me how Mr Ross can go about setting the record straight and removing the inaccurate accusation that he has made in his comments? [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will deal with one point of order before I get on to any others.

I thank the cabinet secretary for his contribution. That is not a point of order, but the cabinet secretary has nonetheless made his point on the record. The mechanism for correcting the *Official Report* is known to all members, so I do not need to repeat it.

Douglas Ross *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Douglas Ross has a point of order.

Douglas Ross: Further to that point of order, I want to go through a couple of points. First, the meeting was cancelled and the alternative dates were not suitable for another Scottish Government minister, so we are now looking at October— [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members! We need to hear the member who has the floor.

Douglas Ross: Secondly, the health secretary is on record in the *Official Report* refusing to meet the group. When I asked him during health questions, he said that it would not be appropriate.

Finally, I raised the matter today—I know that SNP members will want to hear this—because, yesterday, the save our surgeries Burghead and Hopeman campaign Facebook page said this:

"We are very disappointed that our planned meeting with Cab Sec for Health ... Michael Matheson had to be cancelled due to his other commitment.

Our community has been left without proper services for long enough and we need action now!"

It finished:

"Impatiently awaiting new date".

We are all impatiently awaiting that new date. The health secretary should respond immediately—
[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

I will deal with that point of order before I take any other point of order. As Mr Ross knows, that was also not a point of order, although his comments are now on the record. I imagine that Mr Ross is well aware that there are various routes by which he can pursue the matter.

If another point of order were to be in the same vein, I would not wish to take it.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In the vein of requiring accuracy from members who speak in the chamber, I note that Rachael Hamilton erroneously stated that the Scottish Government had plans to ban fishing in half of Scotland's waters. I ask that Rachael Hamilton consider her responsibility to correct the *Official Report* on that point.

Rachael Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will first respond to the cabinet secretary.

As the cabinet secretary is well aware, that was not a point of order. We are using up members' time. Members should know what is and what is not a point of order. The ways in which the *Official Report* can be corrected are well known to all members.

If Ms Hamilton wants to make a point of order in the same vein, I remind her that it will not be a point of order. There is a way in which to correct the record and we are using up members' time. Rachael Hamilton, do you want to make a point of order?

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, thank you, Presiding Officer. It is saddening to know that a cabinet secretary with such responsibility does not listen in debates. My words were:

"the Green Party's reckless agenda",

supporting a fishing ban in half of Scottish seas. I would like the record to be corrected in respect of that erroneous point of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order—as has been the case for all the other contributions. The ways in which the *Official Report* can be corrected are well known to all members.

As I was going to say, that concludes the debate on the programme for government 2023-24. I would now like to move on to the next item of business.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:07

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-10298, on committee membership, and motion S6M-10299, on committee substitutes.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Christine Grahame as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Christine Grahame be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

Miles Briggs be appointed to replace Tess White as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.—[George Adam]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:08

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I propose to ask a single question on the two Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-10298 and S6M-10299, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Christine Grahame as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Christine Grahame be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

Miles Briggs be appointed to replace Tess White as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We will move on to members' business.

NHS Borders Paediatric Ambulatory Care Unit

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-09590, in the name of Christine Grahame, on NHS Borders paediatric ambulatory care unit celebrating its 20th anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates NHS Borders on the 20th anniversary of its Paediatric Ambulatory Care Unit, which is based at Borders General Hospital, in Melrose; understands that the Paediatric Ambulatory Care Unit is a fundamental part of the wider innovation of children's healthcare at NHS Borders with a focus on keeping children at home and avoiding time in hospital where possible; notes that the Unit was set up on 20 May 2003 to allow children to receive treatment and return home rather than having to be admitted to a ward and that, over the last 20 years, thousands of children have attended the Unit to have a range of assessments, procedures, investigations and treatments, and pays credit to the paediatric nursing team on their commitment, quality of care and innovation in developing the service, and contributing to a better experience for children and families who have been able to avoid being admitted to hospital thanks to the Paediatric Ambulatory Care Unit.

17:11

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Presiding Officer, you will be delighted to learn that I am not going to mention the words "point of order."

It is a privilege to lead this debate, and I thank all members who signed the motion to allow it to proceed.

Hospital is a scary enough place for adults, and more so for children. For their parents and carers, it can be very stressful and, indeed, upsetting. The philosophy behind ambulatory paediatrics—which is a bit of a mouthful—is that children should not be admitted to hospital unless it is absolutely necessary to do so and that, as far as possible, care should be arranged in their own homes. I might add that that is perhaps especially important in rural areas, with long distances to hospitals—whether local or outwith the area—and with the issues of remoteness and limited public transport. I have no doubt that the ambulatory paediatrics process helps with the entire experience, including children's treatment and healing and recovery process. Indeed, on seeing the success of the paediatric ambulatory units, adult services have since built similar models. So, tonight, I am pleased to congratulate NHS Borders paediatric ambulatory care unit, which has recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

The unit is based at Borders general hospital—known locally as the BGH—in Melrose, and I understand that the ambulatory care unit is a fundamental part of wider innovation in children's healthcare at NHS Borders, which also includes social care, with a focus on keeping children at home and, as I say, avoiding them having to spend time in hospital where possible.

As I stated, the unit was set up on 20 May 2003 to allow the children to receive treatment and return home rather than have to be admitted to a ward. Over the past 20 years, thousands of children have attended the unit to have a range of assessments, procedures, investigations and treatments.

Located in ward 15 of the BGH, the unit—named "only for the day"—was set up to provide day care for children who require such things as blood tests, medical assessments and allergy testing. Before the unit opened, those children would have gone to the Noah's ark ward and been treated alongside children who had been admitted to ward as in-patients. The unit also runs BCG immunisation clinics.

Importantly, the service separates in-patient and out-patient services. The only for the day ward also provides a friendly, relaxed environment for the children. The nurses can dedicate their time to caring for them and can build up relationships with the children and their families—again, that all helps the healing process. Of course, that means that there is less time waiting for treatment and less anxiety for everyone.

The success of the unit is a credit to the paediatric nursing team's commitment, quality of care and innovation in developing the service and contributing to a better experience for children and families who have been able to avoid being admitted to hospital, thanks to the unit. Indeed, former patients and parents have shared their thanks for the unit, including one mum whose daughter was the first child diagnosed with a nut allergy at the unit and who has just celebrated her 24th birthday. As I have said, adult services have built in similar models because of the success of the unit.

I want to end on a quote from Dr Andrew Duncan, consultant paediatrician and associate director of medical education at NHS Borders. He said:

"Over the past 20 years, the backbone of the service has been our amazing paediatric nursing team. They have shown huge amounts of flexibility and imagination in development of the service.

New skills have been developed in intervention, blood tests, psychological support and undertaking specific procedures such as specialist immunisations and accessing medical devices. This has meant many children have been able to have treatment locally, rather than

travelling outwith the Borders. We know staying at home makes a huge difference to the lives of children and families and we are proud to have provided this service for the past 20 years.”

I once again congratulate everyone on the team, NHS Borders and the BGH on the service, and I look forward to hearing contributions from other members to see whether the good practice is reflected in other parts of Scotland.

17:15

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Christine Grahame for securing this important debate, which recognises the work of NHS Borders paediatric ambulatory care unit, following its 20th anniversary in May, and I join her in celebrating its achievements.

As Christine Grahame has said, over the past 20 years, the care unit, with its specialist team of nurses, has provided blood tests, medical assessments and allergy tests and has supported thousands of children in the comfort of an out-patient setting. That approach means that fewer children are admitted into hospital for treatment or have to travel to be treated in other parts of the country. For children and their families, the reassurance that is provided by being in that familiar setting results in less stress.

The unit has also helped to free up bed space at the BGH across local services, offering peace of mind for children and their parents, and the paediatric nurses there have developed skills including the delivery of specialist immunisations and the use of medical devices. As Christine Grahame alluded to, they have also offered psychological support to children and parents across the Scottish Borders. The staff deserve our praise, recognition and thanks for their work—I thank them hugely.

I also want to take this opportunity to address some of the pressures that health services in the Borders are presently facing. Having visited the BGH last week, it is clear that the present Scottish National Party-Green Government has not yet delivered a meaningful national health service recovery plan. During the visit, I learned about the severe pressures that are being felt across the service, and there is simply no capacity to flex as this winter approaches. Problems are being seen in the accident and emergency department, through the wards and into the step-down Borders view interim care facility.

Christine Grahame: It is unfortunate that you are taking this opportunity to attack the health service—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Christine Grahame: It is unfortunate that the member is taking this opportunity to attack the health service rather than, just for once, congratulating the unit at the BGH on something that it is delivering. You were doing so well until then, but you have disappointed me entirely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You were also doing well up to a point, Ms Grahame. Please speak through the chair.

Craig Hoy: I thank Christine Grahame for her suitable chastisement. I am sure that we will continue to clash on “Representing Border”. However, I want to take this opportunity to address some concerns that were raised with me directly by senior NHS managers, including the chair of the health board, when I visited the hospital last week. The problems that I said had been seen in A and E, through the wards and into the Borders view interim care facility reflect the real pressures that our local health service is facing, particularly in social care and care at home. Many hospital patients who are ready to be discharged are being forced to wait several weeks and sometimes months for care packages to be arranged so that they can be discharged from hospital. At the time of my visit, 80 out of 310 beds were occupied by patients who were ready to be discharged, which was creating bottlenecks throughout the hospital. Despite the huge efforts of staff—I say to Ms Grahame that I celebrate those efforts—the issue is still resulting in elective surgery appointments being cancelled.

Alongside the board chair, Karen Hamilton, I visited the medical assessment unit. That unit is supposed to signpost patients to a ward or another setting within 72 hours. However, last week there were five patients receiving end-of-life care in the unit. As one member of staff said:

“This is a busy place. This is not a good place for people to die.”

Those patients deserve better.

I recently met general practitioners from Earlston medical practice, who, increasingly, are being asked to deliver secondary care in a primary care setting, through no fault of national health service staff whatsoever but simply because of the capacity in the system. Innovations such as the paediatric ambulatory ward and the health board’s hospital at home pilot, which I had the privilege and honour to see in action, are very much to be welcomed, as is the commitment that is shown by staff.

However, as we prepare for winter, NHS Borders wards and facilities are already above capacity, and there is no room to flex. The hard-working workforce is operating at full capacity, so I hope that the minister will listen to patients and clinicians and will properly resource our NHS and

social care sector in rural areas. I commend staff at NHS Borders for their efforts in paediatrics, wards, operating theatres, specialist mental health services and other services. As winter approaches, I urge ministers to give them the tools and the resources to do the job.

Christine Grahame: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance. Is it not important that a member who takes part in the debate speaks to the motion that is before the chamber and does not deviate so far that they are not actually speaking to the motion?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Christine Grahame for her point of order. That is indeed a requirement under standing orders. However, I did not see any reason to intervene on the member, who referred to the motion at various stages throughout his speech.

17:21

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Christine Grahame for lodging her motion for debate, which provides a welcome opportunity to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the paediatric ambulatory care unit at Borders general hospital and is a chance to thank all NHS staff, past and present, for the outstanding care that they have provided for children across the Borders over many years. I am immensely proud of and grateful for the remarkable contribution that the unit and the wider NHS Borders team make every day to support so many of my constituents and those of other members, no more so than in these incredibly challenging times.

Two decades ago, NHS Borders embarked on a journey to enhance healthcare accessibility for the region's children and families. The inception of the unit—known, as Christine Grahame has said, as “only for the day”—on 20 May 2003 was a testament to the staff's commitment to the wellbeing of our youngest citizens. Since then, as we have heard, the team that works from the unit has treated thousands of children—crucially, without the need for them to be admitted to a ward or, as sometimes happened, travel outwith the region for treatment. That has made a significant contribution to the innovation of children's healthcare in the NHS.

As Dr Andrew Duncan, consultant paediatrician and associate director of medical education at NHS Borders, said at the time of the 20th anniversary, when paying tribute to the paediatric nursing team,

“New skills have been developed in intervention, blood tests, psychological support and undertaking specific procedures such as specialist immunisations and accessing medical devices.”

Prior to the unit being set up to provide day care for such things as medical assessments and allergy testing, children would have had to come into hospital—to Noah's ark—and be treated alongside children who had been admitted to the ward as in-patients, with all the anxiety that that can mean for children and their parents. The new unit that was formed in 2003 was forward thinking and, 20 years on, it continues to play a hugely important role in the care of Borderers and in influencing other such initiatives across the rest of Scotland.

However, the unit does so at a time when our NHS is facing its biggest challenge in its 75-year history—no more so than in the care of children in the Borders. For all the positive achievements of the unit, we still have the challenge of the average wait time for paediatric surgery out-patients in the Borders, which is currently running at an average of 74 weeks. Child and adolescent mental health service waiting times in the Borders mean that, currently, only 31 per cent of young people are being seen within 18 weeks. That falls short of the Government's legal—

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Do you welcome the fact that paediatric ambulatory care nurses are trained in mental health first aid? Going to hospital can provoke anxiety, and the training can also help to deal with some young people who have mental health challenges.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I know that we are at the start of a new term, so I remind members that all comments should be made through the chair.

Colin Smyth: I very much welcome that fact, but we have a challenge because the Government's legal target is 90 per cent of those young people being seen within 18 weeks and, at the moment, Scottish Borders is running at 31 per cent. I know that a lot of work is being done particularly to tackle the longest waiting times, but we have a lot of progress to make. Those are not just statistics—they are all children and families who are dealing with the anxiety and uncertainty that comes with prolonged waiting times.

Our NHS staff in the Borders and across the country are working tirelessly to deliver the best possible standard of care, but we need to redouble our efforts to make sure that they have the resources to enable them to do so. Too many, including children, are still waiting too long, and two years on from the publication of the Scottish Government's recovery plan, those waiting times are not going down as they need to. The hard work and professionalism of our NHS staff is inspiring, but let us give them the resources and support that they need to provide the high-quality care that our children, families and communities right across the Borders and Scotland deserve.

The paediatric ambulatory care unit is a shining example of that high-quality care and of the NHS values that we are all proud of—compassion, accessibility, equality and innovation. It is not just leading the way in children’s healthcare; it is also inspiring changes in the way in which we deliver adult healthcare.

I wish a very happy 20th anniversary to the paediatric ambulatory care unit at Borders general hospital. I wish all those involved many more decades of the excellence and the compassionate care that they provide every day, for which we are immensely grateful.

17:26

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and congratulate my friend and colleague Christine Grahame MSP on securing it. What an excellent contribution the member made in speaking to her motion.

I also start by thanking all the staff at NHS Borders for the work that they do every day but, in relation to today’s debate, I particularly thank those staff who are working in the paediatric ambulatory care unit at Borders general.

As a registered nurse myself, I have experience in adult ambulatory care and a wee bit of paediatrics, so I know about the vital importance of ambulatory care. It bridges the gap between the hospital and community children’s services, concentrates on areas such as accident and emergency and out-patients, works at improving communication with families and the primary health care team, and, importantly, works with the home care nursing services to develop new services such as day units.

The unit at Borders general is a fundamental part of the wider innovation of children’s healthcare at NHS Borders, with a focus on keeping children at home and avoiding time in hospital where possible. The paediatric ambulatory care unit was set up 20 years ago in May 2003, to allow children to get treatment and go home rather than needing to be admitted to a ward as an in-patient. In the past 20 years, more than 8,000 children have attended the ambulatory care unit to have a range of assessments, procedures, investigations and treatments.

As Dr Andrew Duncan said,

“Over the past 20 years, the backbone of the service has been our amazing paediatric nursing team.”

It is worth mentioning that again. Dr Duncan went on to say:

“They have shown huge amounts of flexibility and imagination in development of the service.”

We know that new skills such as intravenous interventions, blood tests and psychological support, which I mentioned in my intervention, have been developed. It is important that we help to support and address mental health in young people when they come to us through any service, including the ambulatory care service.

The work that has been carried out by the exceptionally dedicated and specialist healthcare professionals has meant that many children have been able to have treatment locally, rather than having to travel outside the Borders. We know that staying at home makes a huge difference to the lives of children and families and all the team at NHS Borders, both past and present, should be proud of the service that they have created.

Ambulatory paediatrics is an exciting and challenging area to be involved in, with much scope for development. I was interested to read that, during the past 10 years, there has been a 30 per cent increase in the number of under-fives attending emergency departments. That compares to an increase of 15 per cent for all children and young people seeking urgent care in the same time period.

Those figures are due to changes in demographics and in carer behaviour that have arisen for a number of reasons. I swithered about whether to include more detail about attendance issues at emergency departments, but I will say that lack of paediatric experience in primary care and in the assessment of risk play a role in the increase in referral rates to secondary care services, which demonstrates why paediatric units, such as the one in Borders general, are so important.

The investment in virtual hospital care models in paediatric medicine is increasing as acute settings struggle to manage the pressures caused by increasing demand. I ask the minister what learning can be taken from the unit at Borders general and replicated across other health boards, both to alleviate pressure on those boards and to improve outcomes for children and young people.

I place on record my thanks to all the staff at NHS Borders for leading the way with the paediatric ambulatory care unit and congratulate Christine Grahame on securing the debate.

17:30

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Christine Grahame for bringing the motion to the chamber and, on behalf of the Scottish Labour health team and as a member for the region, congratulate NHS Borders on the 20th anniversary of the paediatric ambulatory care unit at Borders general hospital in Melrose.

There are few things more important than the health and wellbeing of our children, and that such specialist and focused provision remains in the Borders is a real positive and shows the importance of dedicated paediatric care.

It is heartening to learn from the NHS Borders description of the ward that the key aims of the unit include reducing waiting times for children and having nurses with specific responsibility to care for them when they visit the ward. As other members have said, that will be well received by the young people and their families.

It is important that this service remains in the Borders. At a time when so many have to leave for work and to access other services, this NHS provision remains firmly within the Borders and serves the people of the area. As a member for South Scotland, I cannot count the number of occasions when I have heard of residents having to travel to Glasgow, Lanarkshire or Edinburgh to receive services. It is undoubtedly the case that the provision of services, including health, can be severely limited in rural areas, so this service should be welcomed. Long may it continue in the Borders.

As the motion states, it is apt that we take time to give credit to paediatric nursing teams in the Borders and across the country. The care that they provide, the compassion that they show and the contribution that they make to the operation of our NHS have been rightly recognised in the motion and by all speakers in this debate.

However, it would be remiss of me, as an Opposition member, not to mention the problems in the NHS, which we should consider. We learned this morning of a staggering one in seven Scots waiting for treatment and of thousands of children and young people on long waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services. The Government has not yet met the 18-week target for CAMHS waiting times. It is important that we discuss those figures when we have the opportunity.

However, we are here to commend the work of the paediatric ambulatory care service and I again do so. Like my colleague Emma Harper, I thought that the medical director's words were wonderful when he made the point about how well nursing services have done during the 20 years of the service.

It is right that we have come together to debate this important unit, but it is our responsibility to ask the minister to tell us about how we can improve services. I hope that the minister will congratulate that service tonight but will also outline some of the issues that must be addressed and, particularly on a day when we have heard the

programme for government, explain how the Government will do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Maree Todd to respond to the debate.

17:34

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Let me start by passing on my congratulations to NHS Borders on the 20th anniversary of its paediatric ambulatory care unit and by thanking Christine Grahame for bringing that important anniversary to the attention of the Parliament. The innovation that NHS Borders has shown in children's healthcare locally is something that it should be very proud of.

The health and wellbeing of our children is of the utmost importance, and it is our aspiration that Scotland should be the best place in the world to grow up in. Supporting and maintaining the health and wellbeing of Scotland's children will, in turn, make for a happier, healthier and more prosperous future adult population, but at a more fundamental level, we have an obligation to protect, nurture and care for our next generation. To put it simply, we have to get it right for every child.

It is in that context that our child health surveillance programme and network of children's nurses become vitally important. I am proud to say that each young family in Scotland is entitled to the support of a health visiting service from pre-birth to a child starting school. Our universal health visiting pathway provides families with a series of 11 home visits as a minimum standard. That sequence of visits best ensures that the health and development of Scotland's children can be well monitored and promoted.

Our health visiting service is universal, but we also offer young mums the option of accessing more intensive support through the family nurse partnership, which helps to guarantee flexibility of approach and the provision of targeted care to children and families who need it most.

All our children are able to access the support of a school nurse as they move through education between five and 18. Our school nursing service is designed to focus support around priority areas that are most likely to influence health and wellbeing in later life. That approach ensures that school nurses can focus on prevention and early intervention, thereby helping children to navigate health and wellbeing concerns and go on to thrive in adulthood.

All those services provide significant benefits, but it is really important that they do not operate in isolation. Our getting it right for every child framework therefore provides the foundation upon

which complementary children's services can integrate effectively. GIRFEC ultimately offers fertile ground for the development of initiatives such as the paediatric ambulatory care unit in NHS Borders. As we have heard today, the ambulatory care unit is an innovation that puts the needs of children at the heart of care and ensures that, as far as possible, services are tailored to the individual. To address Emma Harper's point, that is exactly what we would like to see all over Scotland. We are more than happy to work with NHS Borders to examine what it is doing and how much of that can be rolled out across Scotland.

Of course, NHS Borders has already inspired the hospital at home service, which the Parliament has debated. Our investment of a further £3.6 million in hospital at home provides acute level care at home and avoids hospital admissions for adults. In the past year, the service has supported more than 11,000 people.

Craig Hoy: I ask the minister to look again at hospital at home and the home first programme, which is especially important in rural areas. Will she consider providing additional funding for rural council and health board areas, given that the cost of delivering such services in those areas is significantly higher?

Maree Todd: I would not dream—on the hoof, in the chamber—of interfering with the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee formula, which, I understand, already accounts for the extra burden that rural authorities have. However, I agree with Craig Hoy that it is more important than ever that, in rural areas, such services are delivered closer to home.

We remain absolutely focused on ensuring that the health service recovers from the greatest challenge in its history—the pandemic. I recognise that challenges remain and that there are still unacceptable waits in some specialities, but we are committed to delivering sustained improvements and year-on-year reductions through service redesign and by enhancing regional and national working.

We have provided record funding of more than £19 billion in the 2023-24 budget to support recovery and reform to secure sustainable public services. As well as helping to speed the recovery from the pandemic, the range of reforms across primary and acute services will reduce unnecessary demand for services and develop new pathways of care that are better for patients as we face the health challenges of the coming years.

That includes building on and investing in the recruitment and retention of staff. National health service staffing levels are historically high under this Government, with nearly 23 per cent more

people in post. We have introduced measures to help retain staff and look after their wellbeing, including through the development of a wellbeing hub. We continue our long-term investment in healthcare education by funding a record number of nursing and midwifery student places.

We have also seen a 143.1 per cent increase in the staffing of psychology services since 2007. That demonstrates our commitment to mental health services, which includes improving access to community mental health and wellbeing support. Through our investment in community mental health services, we are providing local authorities with £15 million per year to fund community-based mental health supports for children, young people and their families. In the most recent quarter, 5,093 children and young people started treatment at CAMHS in Scotland, and the past six quarters have seen each of the six highest figures on record for the number of children starting treatment from CAMHS.

Not for one second would I deny the challenges that we face or the improvements that we still need to make, but we cannot dismiss or ignore the seismic and continuing impact of the pandemic and what that has meant for the NHS and its workforce. Therefore, it is disappointing that my colleague Craig Hoy was unable to resist the opportunity to score some political points in this debate. We did not hear him talk up Scotland for being the only part of the UK to have avoided strikes in our NHS. We did not hear him say that our health and social care staff in Scotland are paid more than their counterparts in any other part of the UK—and that was true even before today's announcement of £12 per hour from next April for social care staff. We did not hear him mention that, in our NHS, we have more staff of all professions per head of population. We certainly did not hear that, in Scotland, we have had the best-performing A and E services in the UK for not only this week, this month or this year, but the past eight years.

Our NHS is still in recovery; the NHS all across the UK is in recovery. Every country faces challenges in improving health as we move through and out of the pandemic, but we must move forward and ensure that recovery and reform are not only words, but concrete actions that ensure that—like in NHS Borders—we are getting it right for every child and getting it right for everyone.

Meeting closed at 17:43.

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