



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 14 March 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 14 March 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (Support)	1
North Lanarkshire Council School Estate	2
Rail Development Projects	4
Further Education (Green Economy).....	6
Train Station Accessibility (Dumfries and Galloway).....	7
Music Education (Online Support).....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Drug Deaths.....	10
Drug Deaths.....	15
40 Days for Life Protests	18
Teacher Induction Scheme.....	20
Accident and Emergency Waiting Times.....	22
Breadalbane Street Fire	24
David Hill.....	24
Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Bus Franchising)	25
Horizon (United Kingdom Legislation).....	26
Autism (Mainstream Schooling).....	26
Brain Tumour Awareness Month.....	27
YOUNG CARERS ACTION DAY 2024	29
<i>Motion debated—[Karen Adam].</i>	
Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	29
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP).....	32
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	33
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	35
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green).....	36
Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP).....	38
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	40
The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd).....	41
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	45
SOCIAL JUSTICE	45
Scottish Child Payment (Uptake).....	45
Housing (Empty Properties)	46
Deafblindness Definition (Social Security Scotland)	47
Social Housing Waiting Lists (Disabled People)	48
Social Isolation and Loneliness	50
Housing.....	52
ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY THROUGH PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT	55
<i>Motion moved—[Bob Doris].</i>	
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	55
The Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work (Gillian Martin)	58
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con).....	63
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	67
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	70
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	74
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	76
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP).....	78
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	81
John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP).....	83
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	86
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	88
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	91
Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	93
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	94

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	96
Bob Doris	99
INVESTIGATORY POWERS (AMENDMENT) BILL	104
<i>Motion moved—[Angela Constance].</i>	
DECISION TIME	105

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 14 March 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. Our first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would appreciate short and succinct questions and responses.

Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (Support)

1. **Bob Doris:** To ask the Scottish Government, other than the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner and Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, what mechanisms exist to support the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to improve its practices, processes and decision making. (S6O-03206)

Ruth Charteris KC (Solicitor General for Scotland): There is a strong culture of review and improvement within the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

The Police Investigations and Review Commissioner investigates police incidents and does not have a role in relation to the work of COPFS. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman may consider how complaints have been handled but cannot review prosecutorial decisions. HM Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland provides an essential function for scrutinising practice and identifying potential for improvement through independent evidence-based inspection.

COPFS has a dedicated team that investigates complaints and enables victims to exercise their statutory right of review of certain prosecutorial decisions.

Bob Doris: In 2016, my constituent's daughter, Ms Webster, was charged with an offence by Police Scotland. It took six months for the prosecutor to identify that Ms Webster has informed the police, at the time of the charge, that exculpatory evidence was available. In the further investigation that followed, neither she nor her lawyer was contacted—indeed, I was told by the Lord Advocate that that would have been inappropriate. Two years after that, the case was dropped, within days of the exculpatory evidence being passed to the Crown Office.

Can the Solicitor General not see that an independent review of that case could help to

identify errors and improve practices, processes and decision making? Given that the Lord Advocate has, so far, declined that, is there any other mechanism by which such a review could be secured?

Ruth Charteris: I am aware of the case to which Bob Doris has referred. Although it would be inappropriate to discuss details in the Parliament today, that case has been the subject of extensive review and consideration by the law officers.

COPFS keeps all decisions under review. Ultimately, in this case, when the exculpatory material was received, the original decision to proceed was reviewed. Following that, a decision was made to end the prosecution.

The Lord Advocate has already made an offer to meet Mr Doris and his constituent, and I gladly renew that offer today.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): In a letter to me about the Horizon scandal, the Lord Advocate said that

“prosecutors could not and would not have raised proceedings on the basis of the Horizon evidence alone”,

and I am aware that the Crown Office used an independent report that was prepared by the forensic accountancy firm Second Sight Investigations, which was presented to it by the Post Office as corroboration. The director of Second Sight has said that its interim report “revealed system flaws” and problems with the prosecution process. I am therefore keen to understand why the Crown Office was content to use the report as corroboration. If the Solicitor General is not able to say today why the Crown Office still proceeded to use that report as corroboration, will she at least commit to writing to me on that point?

Ruth Charteris: In a statement to the Parliament in January, the Lord Advocate explained the position of COPFS as to its awareness of flaws in the Horizon system and its approach to prosecutions that were consequent on that.

On our openness to the scrutiny of all decisions, practices and processes, matters are progressing with the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission and the appeal court. A public inquiry is also under way. The Crown has publicly committed to supporting all those processes. I will gladly write to Pauline McNeill to take up in greater detail the points that she has raised.

North Lanarkshire Council School Estate

2. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with North Lanarkshire Council to improve the school estate. (S6O-03207)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): In Scotland, the school estate is owned and managed by local authorities. However, we have supported North Lanarkshire Council, through the previous Scotland's schools for the future programme, by awarding it significant funding of £55 million towards three new schools. We will further support North Lanarkshire Council's Chryston high school extension through phase 3 of the £2 billion learning estate investment programme.

The £2 billion learning estate investment programme is a joint programme with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and follows on from the successful £1.8 billion investment in Scotland's schools for the future programme, which delivered 117 new or refurbished learning facilities across Scotland from 2009 to 2021.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government has cut capital funding for projects such as schools in North Lanarkshire by 31 per cent this year—which is far higher than the cut that was received by the Government.

The last new school project to receive money from the Scottish Government was back in 2014. Over the three phases of the funding programme that the cabinet secretary talked about, North Lanarkshire received funding for only one existing secondary extension, despite presenting a number of excellent bids for much-needed new schools.

When can pupils in North Lanarkshire expect to receive Government funding for new-build schools that are fit for modern education?

Jenny Gilruth: As I alluded to in my initial response, North Lanarkshire Council has been awarded significant funding through the schools for the future programme and the learning estate investment programme. That has been a result of the direct request from North Lanarkshire Council to prioritise that school in North Lanarkshire.

However, the capital challenges that the Government faces at the current time are well known to Mark Griffin. He alluded to the cut that is coming from the UK Government, which is undoubtedly impacting on the funding from this Government. We are protecting local government funding within that context. I look forward to continuing to work with the Scottish Futures Trust on improving the remainder of Scotland's school estate.

It is worth my while to point out that, since 2007, the quality of Scotland's school estate has improved from around 60 per cent of Scotland's schools being in good or satisfactory condition to more than 90 per cent, thanks to investment from this Scottish National Party Government.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The SNP's record of investment in our school estate speaks for itself, but how much is Labour's legacy from the private finance initiative costing in North Lanarkshire?

Jenny Gilruth: North Lanarkshire Council's PFI schools contract was signed back in 2005. The associated estimated payments total about £764 million, with £430 million of that still to be paid out. That means that, 17 years after it was last in Government in Scotland, Labour's PFI legacy is still holding Scotland back, as we have less money to spend on front-line services for Scotland's children. That is a shameful record, and Labour members in the chamber should be embarrassed.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Parents of additional support needs pupils protested outside North Lanarkshire Council last year. They said that teachers and pupils are being failed by an education system that does not recognise the specialised skills that are needed for children with additional support needs. Many school-age children end up, due to the lack of ASN schools available, being placed in mainstream education schools, despite meeting the criteria for an ASN school.

What is the cabinet secretary's response to the many families in North Lanarkshire who are being failed by the education system due to the lack of specialised schools and facilities for ASN pupils?

Jenny Gilruth: It is worth my while to put on the record that we are seeing record levels of investment in additional support needs pupils through pupil support assistance, which is because of ring-fenced funding coming directly from the Scottish Government. The Government also ring fences £15 million-worth of funding to protect ASN support in our schools.

However, as I alluded to in response to the original question, the school estate in general is the responsibility of local authorities. We work with local authorities where we are able to do so, including to prioritise the needs of additional support needs pupils.

It is worth my while to say that some of the funding that we announced at the end of last year is going towards improving the school estate for additional support needs pupils.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged.

Rail Development Projects

4. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for any major rail development projects beyond the end of 2024. (S6O-03209)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Scottish ministers remain firmly committed to infrastructure investment as a key factor in securing economic growth and high-quality public infrastructure across Scotland. That has been made much harder due to cuts in our capital budget imposed by the United Kingdom Government.

The Scottish Government's investment in Network Rail's operations, maintenance and renewals for Scotland's railway will increase by £0.45 billion, from £3.75 billion in the 2019 to 2024 period to £4.2 billion throughout 2024 to 2029.

We continue to progress a pipeline of enhancement projects. Sue Webber may particularly note the planned electrification of the line from Glasgow to East Kilbride, which is targeted to be delivered by December 2025.

Sue Webber: I thank the cabinet secretary for outlining the developments that are in the pipeline. However, she will be aware that residents of Winchburgh are weary of the Scottish National Party-Green Government's continued shirking of responsibility for building a train station in their town. On 8 March, the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie, wrote to me, outlining his understanding that West Lothian Council is responsible for organising and issuing invitations to the multistakeholder meeting. West Lothian Council first wrote to the Scottish Government in June 2023, but only yesterday received a response committing to a date for the meeting. Given that the Winchburgh train station project is not developer led, the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland must take charge and lead on it. Now that the minister has agreed to the meeting, can the cabinet secretary assure members that building the station will be a priority for the Government?

Fiona Hyslop: As the member well knows, I am the constituency MSP for Winchburgh. In that constituency capacity, I have long campaigned for a station that was always to be developer led. To avoid a conflict of interest, I am recused from having any involvement in Government interests on the matter, but I can—and will—still act on such issues as the constituency MSP. As such, I will ask the lead minister to write to the member to address her concerns, as is appropriate. I am glad to hear that the member has received a reply about the meeting and about that progress.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary believe that the London to Birmingham high speed 2 rail project, which is now expected to cost an eye-watering £583 million per mile, benefits Scotland in any way whatsoever? If so, how?

Fiona Hyslop: Since 2009, the Scottish Government has reconnected 16 communities to the rail network, with new stations and two more stations planned to open this year. However, the eye-watering curtailed HS2 project will have limited, if any, benefit to Scotland. The collapse in capital spend elsewhere by the Westminster Government harms the economy and harms Scotland.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware that East Lothian is one of the fastest-growing areas in Scotland and that Haddington is one of the fastest-growing towns locally. The Rail Action Group, East of Scotland—RAGES—is campaigning for the reopening of Haddington's branch line. Will she agree to look carefully at the campaign and its calls, and seek to get Haddington back on track and back on to our rail network?

Fiona Hyslop: I am aware of the campaign in Haddington. I know that both Mr Hoy and the constituency MSP, Paul McLennan, have pursued the issue. It is important to address the interests of communities. As we are all aware, it can take some time to develop such plans, but I will ask my officials, along with colleagues at Network Rail and ScotRail, to be aware of the Haddington developments.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): On 2 November 2023, the cabinet secretary told me that we would get a response to the proposal for a train station at Newburgh, made in line with the Scottish transport appraisal guidance

"in the next few weeks."—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2023; c 51.]

It is now months later. When will the people in Newburgh hear whether they have been successful?

Fiona Hyslop: On 16 January, my officials at Transport Scotland met the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership—SEStran—along with representatives of its consultants and the Newburgh train station group to discuss the detailed options appraisal report for Newburgh. The appraisal is considering a range of multimodal transport options, including a station at Newburgh. The appraisal group has requested from SEStran further information that underpins the detail presented in the report. Once that additional information that has been requested from the promoter of the appraisal has been received and considered, Transport Scotland officials will provide feedback on the appraisal report.

Further Education (Green Economy)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that Scotland's further education

sector is aligned with the needs of businesses within the renewables sector and other industries associated with the green economy. (S6O-03210)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Our education and skills system is already adapting to the transition to net zero, and institutions such as colleges are key anchors. With funding from the Scottish Funding Council, the Energy Skills Partnership acts as the college sector lead for the transition to net zero and directly supports institutions in developing their capability, capacity and curriculum pathways for the transition. The ESP also engages with employers on behalf of the sector, establishing partnerships across the further education sector and industry to enable the green economy.

Brian Whittle: For apprenticeship week last week I visited a firm of electrical engineers in Kilmarnock, Aird Walker & Ralston. Its representatives said that sluggish growth or a lack of growth is a problem, because the company struggles to recruit the appropriate apprentices. They say that the biggest problem is that school pupils are unaware of potential careers through apprenticeships in areas such as electrical engineering. Colleges have the capacity to deliver the engineers that we need for the green economy, but there seems to be a missing link between schools, businesses and colleges. What can the Scottish Government do to ensure that career guidance includes the opportunities that apprenticeships can bring in the growing green economy?

Graeme Dey: Brian Whittle raises a relevant point. The promotion of green skills in relation to career options for young people is incredibly important. I was at North East Scotland College in Aberdeen on Monday, where we were discussing just that issue: ensuring that young people are encouraged to consider careers in energy and other such sectors as long-term career opportunities. The careers service absolutely has a role to play in that, but alongside and working in conjunction with employers, who can perhaps offer work experience opportunities, as well as working with colleges to shape their curriculums.

I am happy to engage further with Brian Whittle on the matter.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Train Station Accessibility (Dumfries and Galloway)

7. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the accessibility for disabled

people of train stations in Dumfries and Galloway. (S6O-03212)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Dumfries station is currently being upgraded with a new footbridge and lifts to make access to the platforms easier. Although the accessibility of stations is a matter that is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government is fully supportive of and engaged with the project.

My officials are independently progressing recommendation 19 of strategic transport projects review 2, on reviewing station accessibility across Scotland, including in Dumfries and Galloway. The review is expected to complete in spring 2024 and, although it is too early to comment on any outcome to the review, recommendation 19 reinforces the Scottish Government's commitment to improve access for all to Scotland's rail network.

Colin Smyth: Even after the work at Dumfries station, almost half the stations in the region will still not be fully accessible. In particular, Kirkconnel station has no disabled access whatever to the southbound platform, which means that one of my constituents, who is in a wheelchair, had to stay on the train from Glasgow to Sanquhar, change there and take a northbound train back from Sanquhar to Kirkconnel, because they could not initially get off the train at Kirkconnel. There have been feasibility studies on what is needed to end that discrimination against disabled people, but my constituent wants to know when there will be action to make Kirkconnel station fully accessible.

Fiona Hyslop: As I set out in my original answer, the matter is reserved to the UK Government, and the Department for Transport is undertaking the detailed accessibility audit. I appreciate the member's frustration, and he has set out the concerns of his constituent very well. I will do what I can within my powers to ensure that, once the audit has been completed, identification of the work and the priorities is progressed.

Music Education (Online Support)

8. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the creation of a national online support platform to expand music learning for children and young people in Scotland. (S6O-03213)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Government has transformed instrumental music tuition in Scotland's schools by funding councils to eradicate unfair music tuition charges. This financial year, we are providing £12 million to continue that commitment. The most recent instrumental music survey, which was published in

December last year, shows that the number of pupils participating in instrumental music tuition is at a record high since the survey began 11 years ago.

Since 2007, we have invested more than £150 million in the youth music initiative, helping young people across Scotland to access music and develop their wider skills and learning. Schools across Scotland already have access to the national e-learning offer—NeLO—which is supported by £1.5 million of investment from the Scottish Government. It includes a range of online learning materials, recorded lessons and live lessons on music.

Neil Bibby: Music and the arts should be for everyone, and it is clear that we need to do far more to create opportunities for working-class children. In Wales, the National Music Service, working with Charanga, has developed a national bespoke online support platform, not to replace existing instrumental tuition but to help non-music-specialist teachers to expand music learning in schools. For a relatively small cost, we could make that transformative change here in Scotland, too. Would the minister agree to meet me to discuss and explore that proposal?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to meet the member to listen to any contributions that he may have in this space. However, as Education Scotland has already advised, what is being proposed by Welsh Labour is very similar, as I understand it, to the offer that we currently have nationally through the online NeLO platform and the resources on Glow, which is available in all local authority areas in Scotland. I am more than happy to meet the member to discuss the matter.

It is, of course, worth putting on the record that it was the Scottish National Party Government that removed fees for instrumental music tuition to make it free to all pupils. I remind Neil Bibby that the reason why we had to do so was that some councils, including Labour-run councils, decided to introduce charges, which saw parents being billed up to £300 per year.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Drug Deaths

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This week marked the start of Ramadan for Scotland's Muslim community. I am sure that all members will join me in wishing everyone who is observing Ramadan peace and happiness.

For years, drug deaths have been Scotland's national shame. This week, it emerged that the number has risen again—it is up by 10 per cent on the previous year. Humza Yousaf's new Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, Christina McKelvie, was asked for her response. She said that "the plan is working". Surely the First Minister cannot agree with that.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I, too, wish Muslims in Scotland, across the United Kingdom and across the world a happy Ramadan. However, my thoughts are often with those in Muslim communities who are fasting or cannot access food or water not out of choice because they are fasting for Ramadan, but because of poverty or conflict.

On drug deaths, I say first and foremost that my condolences and the condolences of the entire Government are with every single person who has lost a loved one to a suspected drug death. However, we know from engaging with those families that they do not want warm words or words of sympathy or condolence; they want action.

I was devastated to see that rise, particularly as we witnessed some progress in the previous year, with a reduction in the number of suspected drug deaths. The problem is a deep-rooted, endemic and insidious one in our society, and we are taking a range of significant actions to try to tackle it. We are absolutely committed to that.

We have an unwavering and unshakeable commitment to the national mission to tackle drug deaths. That is why we have continued to expand residential rehab services. I can give some more details on that in subsequent answers. We have provided £50 million a year to community and grass-roots organisations that help people in their local areas who are suffering from substance abuse and addiction. We have progressed work with local authorities such as Glasgow City Council on safer consumption rooms, and we have continued to roll out the carriage of naloxone and to drive up the medication assisted treatment standards, as well as taking a range of other actions. We will continue to maintain the drugs budget for 2024-25.

The rise in the number of suspected drug deaths is deeply disheartening but, from the Government's perspective, it will only serve to ensure that we rededicate and recommit ourselves to tackling one of the most insidious challenges and problems that we face in our society.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister referenced last year's figures. In August last year, the former drugs minister said that the Government was turning the tide on the drug deaths crisis. We now hear from the current drugs minister that, even with a 10 per cent increase, she believes that "the plan is working". It is absolutely not. The number of drug deaths in Scotland has consistently been the highest across Europe, and the number is on the rise again. The Scottish National Party's plan is not working, and the SNP seems to be repeating the same mistakes all over again.

Nicola Sturgeon let a rehab facility in her constituency close in 2019. Now Humza Yousaf has let Turning Point Scotland 218, which is a vital rehab service for women in Glasgow, close. The head of justice at Turning Point Scotland said:

"The loss of this service is likely to lead to more women in custody and trapped within the justice system."

Just in January, the First Minister said in the chamber that that service does "excellent work". He continued:

"I value the project very highly."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2024; c 27.]

Just a few weeks later, it closed. Why did that happen?

The First Minister: I give an absolute confirmation that the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, Christina McKelvie, and I, during our visit to the Bothy, which is an excellent community project based in Craigmillar, said that we absolutely believe that we have to rededicate ourselves and take further action, because we know that the rise is unwelcome. Douglas Ross is right to say that the number of suspected drug deaths per head of the population in Scotland is higher than the number in other parts of the UK, although other parts of the UK have also seen a rise. I suspect that that is partly because of the tide that we are up against. We are, of course, seeing more potent, stronger and more addictive substances on our streets, such as synthetic opioids and nitazines. There is absolutely no complacency about the action that we must take.

Douglas Ross raises an important issue in relation to 218. The closure was Glasgow City Council's decision, not ours. The only decision that was made by the Scottish Government was that, when the council asked whether it could retain the £1.5 million funding for re-tendering to another service, we said that we would allow it to retain that money and use it flexibly.

It would not be correct to say that there are no facilities for women who are dealing with substance abuse in Glasgow. There is a range of those, and I would be happy to release the letter that we have received from the health and social care partnership. There is tomorrow's women Glasgow, a community-based service for women who are involved in the justice system, and the Glasgow drug court, which operates a women-only clinic one day a week. Glasgow has purchased 59 residential placements for men or women in alcohol and drug recovery services, and there are 60 sustained tenancy placements that are specifically open to those involved with justice social work.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please be brief, First Minister.

The First Minister: There is a gender-specific community support service, and there are other services that I will be happy to talk about in later answers.

We continue to provide record funding this year to alcohol and drugs partnerships, and we will continue to take action with our local authorities. Like my predecessor, I am happy to continue cross-party work, so that we can work collectively to tackle one of the most challenging issues that our society faces.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister wants to dodge responsibility for the closure of a vital service that has served women in Glasgow for two decades. Let us listen to what the Unite regional officer, Linda Wilson, said:

"It's utterly shameful that both Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government believe the best way to help vulnerable women is to cut beds and slash the funding of a lifeline service."

Newspaper reports today include emails that suggest that the Government was aware that Turning Point Scotland 218 would be closed but did not step in to prevent the closure. Unite says that it was

"crystal clear ... that the Scottish Government was central to the decision-making process which led to the 218 Service closing."

Humza Yousaf is trying to avoid responsibility and is using the same excuses as Nicola Sturgeon used. Why is the SNP making the same mistakes all over again?

The First Minister: I will try to inject some facts into this discussion. We are not cutting the number of beds. The Scottish Government has invested £38 million in expanding capacity in residential rehab as part of the national mission. Of such beds, 32 are operational and another 38 are in the pipeline for the next few months. We believe that we are absolutely on track, with our projected funding, to meet our commitment to increase the

overall residential rehab capacity from 425 to 650 by 2026.

We are also very much on track to meet the targets that we have set for publicly funded rehab placements, so Douglas Ross's suggestion that we are cutting the number of residential rehab beds is simply not true.

Regarding Glasgow City Council's decision about the 218 service, I am happy to release the letters about that if they have not been released already. I will quote directly from the letter that one of our civil servants wrote to Glasgow City Council:

"We consider that any decision to retender the service is entirely a matter for Glasgow City Council but confirm we have no objection to the replacement service utilising the funding currently allocated to the 218 service."

We did the right thing by ensuring that funding was flexible for the local authority. A range of initiatives are still available for women in Glasgow to access, including the Lilius community custody centre, which is based in Glasgow and where practice in supporting all women who are serving sentences has evolved greatly. There is also Glasgow's Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid and Glasgow East Women's Aid, which can provide up to 64 safe places for women, and SAY Women, which supports women aged from 16 to 25 and has nine spaces in purpose-built flats. There is a range of initiatives.

The Presiding Officer: Please be brief, First Minister.

The First Minister: I would be happy to write to Douglas Ross with detail about how we are supporting Glasgow City Council and other local authorities to ensure that they increase residential rehab, rather than decreasing it.

Douglas Ross: I do not know how the First Minister can possibly stand there and say that he is supporting people who are struggling when a facility has closed after 20 years of supporting vulnerable women.

The Government was involved. Emails that were published in a newspaper article today said that the tendering of the 218 service was

"with relevant ministers for a view".

Another email—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: Another email referred to the "likelihood" of

"needing ministerial clearance for any new approach".

That is what is in the emails that have been published today.

During the SNP's leadership contest, Humza Yousaf said:

"if there's more money we can give to alcohol and drugs in particular, then that is going to be a priority focus for me."

Well, it is clear that it is not a priority. Nicola Sturgeon cut funding for drug treatment in 2015, and the number of drug deaths rose. This year, Humza Yousaf has cut the treatment budget in real terms. The SNP promised to create hundreds of new rehab beds, but it has managed to create just over 30. The addiction crisis in Scotland is out of control. Since the SNP came to power, the number of drug deaths has doubled. We have the worst figures in Europe, and new figures show that the number of deaths is increasing again.

Scotland's shame has not gone away. Nicola Sturgeon admitted that she took her "eye off the ball". Has Humza Yousaf not done exactly the same?

The First Minister: I reject that in its entirety. Let me take some of the issues that Douglas Ross has mentioned. We have increased the drugs budget over the years. For example, we have presided over a 67 per cent increase in funding between 2014-15 and 2023-24, according to Audit Scotland figures that were recently published. The draft budget for 2024-25 has maintained our alcohol and drugs budget at the same level, and this year there has been record funding of £130 million for alcohol and drugs partnerships.

Douglas Ross mentioned that I said, "if there's more money". The point is that our budget has been cut by £500 million in real terms by the UK Government. If Douglas Ross is able to convince his colleagues south of the border to give further funding to Scotland, I absolutely promise him—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —that drugs and alcohol policy will be one of the areas that we will look to give further funding to.

I am happy to write to Douglas Ross with more detail on the action that we are taking. We have ensured that there is greater carriage of naloxone, with more than 150,000 kits. We are working with Glasgow City Council on more radical approaches, such as a safe consumption room. We are increasing the number of beds in residential rehab, and we continue to work with local authorities to help them to tackle the issue.

I make the offer that I have already made to Douglas Ross and to others across the chamber that we are willing to work cross party in order to resolve one of the most difficult challenges that this country has faced. It is an issue that has

plagued our society not just for years but for decades.

Drug Deaths

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I join others in wishing Muslims here and around the world Ramadan Mubarak. Ramadan is a month of fasting from sunrise to sunset, of reflection on those who are less fortunate and of charity. Our thoughts are with all those who are living in poverty and in conflict at this time. I will have to battle a dry mouth for 10 minutes—fair play to the First Minister who has to do it for 45 minutes.

Since the Scottish National Party Government declared a drug deaths emergency four and a half years ago, more than 5,200 lives have been lost in drug-related deaths—every one of them someone's son, daughter or loved one. In 2023 alone, 1,197 people died, which is a 10 per cent increase on the previous year. The response from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy this week was that the "plan is working".

However, Anne Marie Ward, who is chief executive officer of Faces & Voices of Recovery UK—FAVOR UK—said that Government leaders

"have the audacity to claim progress in this catastrophe. Their assertions are a slap in the face, a mockery of the grim reality we witness daily. How dare they feed us these blatant lies, expecting us to nod along, while our communities are ravaged and our streets are lined with the casualties of their incompetence?"

Who is right? Is it the people who are impacted by drugs or the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Government continues to engage with those who have lived experience and are on their recovery journey. Only yesterday, the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and I met those who have lived experience and are going through the recovery journey, not to spin, as has been suggested, but to directly front up what is an extremely challenging issue and to say that we continue to listen and to act.

That is why I say to Anas Sarwar and to Douglas Ross that nobody in the Government—neither I nor the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy—is complacent or attempting at all to dismiss the very serious concerns that have been raised by them, by parliamentarians across the chamber and indeed by our stakeholders.

However, I point to the fact that we are taking action. For example, we are continuing to expand residential rehabilitation, we are providing funding to community-based organisations and we are working with the likes of Glasgow City Council on more radical approaches such as safer drug-consumption facilities. We are not just doing the

same things; we are looking to see what more we can possibly do that is different. We are widening access to naloxone and we are driving the medication assisted treatment standards. Everybody knows how important same-day access to treatment is and can be. Through the national collaborative, we are working on the rights of those who have lived experience.

If there are particular interventions that Anas Sarwar and others want us to explore and examine, I give them an absolute promise that we will do so with an open mind. However, nobody in the Government—neither I nor the drugs policy minister—is downplaying what is one of the most serious issues that our country is facing.

Anas Sarwar: It is a repeated action of this Government to focus a lot on the inputs but not look at the outcomes of Government policy. What matters here are the outcomes, and the outcome is more people losing their lives to drugs. In Tayside, 83 people died last year. In Edinburgh, it was more than two people a week. In Glasgow, it was six people a week.

In January 2021, the Government set targets to increase residential rehab beds and it promised 225 more beds by 2026. Three years on, only 32 beds are operational. In 2022, the Government said that it would establish drug-checking facilities but, two years on, no facilities are open and not a single licence application has been made.

In what world does the First Minister think that the plan is working? How can he expect families who have lost loved ones to believe him when there does not seem to be any sense of urgency?

The First Minister: Again, I reject the accusation that there is not a sense of urgency. There absolutely is a sense of urgency.

Anas Sarwar started his question by asking what the outputs are, and he is absolutely right that outputs are important. There is an increase in residential rehab beds, and I will come back to the specific point that Anas Sarwar made shortly. The outputs of our actions mean that we now have better and more urgent standards when it comes to access to treatment. The outcomes are that more than 150,000 naloxone kits have been distributed and we know from Police Scotland figures that naloxone has been used about 500 times, which has undoubtedly saved lives. That is an outcome and an output.

On checking facilities for drugs, my understanding is that they require a Home Office licence, which is why we continue to work with Glasgow City Council and engage with the UK Government in that regard.

In relation to the point that Anas Sarwar made, we are on track to meet our targets in relation to

increased capacity of residential rehab. We have invested in eight projects that will provide an additional 172 beds by 2025-26 and, with the further funding that we will provide in 2025-26, we are very confident about meeting the 650 target by the end of the current session of Parliament.

If Anas Sarwar wishes, I can provide a detailed breakdown in writing of the investments that we have made in residential rehab, but we are confident about meeting not just that target and output but the output of having 1,000 publicly funded rehab placements by the end of the current session of Parliament.

Anas Sarwar: The outcome that really matters here is drug deaths falling and not increasing. We have exactly the same drug laws as everywhere else in the UK, but we have almost three times as many drug deaths in Scotland, despite everything that the First Minister said. The outcome that we need the Government to deliver is fewer people dying from drugs, not more and more people dying every year.

It is four and a half years since the SNP Government declared a drug deaths emergency, three years since the launch of its national mission to reduce drug deaths and almost two years since the final report of the drug deaths task force, yet 1,197 more people have died in the past year. Incompetence has consequences. It means that Scotland has the highest rate of drug deaths in Europe. Across Scotland, families are grieving loved ones whose deaths were preventable.

The Government has failed on every promise that it has made. On promises to increase rehab beds—falling behind. Promises on drug-checking facilities—not delivered. Promises on new treatment standards—broken. All that we have heard today is more of the exact same promises that are not being delivered and about a plan that is not working. Drug deaths are going up, not coming down.

I will give the First Minister one last chance. What will he change to get a grip on the crisis and help to save lives in Scotland?

The First Minister: As we know, in many parts of the world and across the United Kingdom, there are challenges with synthetic opioids such as nitazenes and fentanyl, which are more addictive and more potent and are therefore causing real harm and concern across the UK. Anas Sarwar and Douglas Ross were both right to say that levels of drug deaths in Scotland are unacceptable and are higher, per head of population, than in other parts of the UK. However, we have seen increases in England and Wales, which I suspect are largely down to the same issues that we face here. Collectively, we are seeing more addictive

substances such as synthetic opioids on our streets.

I say once again to Anas Sarwar not only that we are taking action but that, while he says that promises on increasing residential rehab have been broken, they have not. I am giving him the evidence, the detail and the facts that show that the level—the number—of residential rehab beds has increased, and we are on track to meet our commitment towards the end of the current session of Parliament. The same goes for publicly funded rehab places.

I can give an absolute guarantee, and a promise, not only to those in the chamber but to those who are listening that, where we can try new and innovative approaches, we will absolutely seek to do so. That is why we are supporting Glasgow with funding for its safer consumption room and why we support checking facilities for drugs and other interventions. If we had power over the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, for example, we would seek to make changes in relation to the decriminalisation of drugs for personal use. We would explore that issue, because we know that such an intervention has worked in other countries.

I end where I started: the Government acknowledges the scale of the problem and the challenges, and we rededicate ourselves to taking further action where we can, to investing where we can and to working with anybody we possibly can in order to tackle this shameful, insidious problem in our society.

40 Days for Life Protests

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the current 40 Days for Life protests. (S6F-02931)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government believes that patients and staff should be able to access abortion services free from intimidation and harassment, and from undue influence. That is why we have committed to fully supporting the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill that Gillian Mackay introduced to the Parliament.

As Gillian Mackay, more than anyone, will be acutely aware, the bill is currently being scrutinised by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I extend my thanks to her for introducing the bill, and to all the witnesses who have provided evidence to the committee thus far. We will continue to support the bill as it makes its way through the parliamentary process, and I am hopeful that its protection will soon be felt by women across Scotland.

Gillian Mackay: In recent years, we have seen reproductive rights go backwards in countries around the world such as the US, Poland and Brazil. However, there are glimmers of hope, with rights expanding in Argentina and Colombia, and the right to an abortion being enshrined in the constitution in France.

Does the First Minister agree that safe access zones must be the first step in advancing rights in Scotland, and does he believe that we should go further, including providing abortion in Scotland up to the legal limit, ensuring equitable access to in vitro fertilisation, and removing abortion from criminal law?

The First Minister: First and foremost, I make it clear that the provision and regulation of national health service abortion services within specified term limits should absolutely be a clinical, not a criminal, matter. I am happy to look at that issue in further detail. I know that there are nuances and complexities in opening up that issue and I am happy to discuss it with the member in due course.

There have been improvements in the provision of later-stage abortions in Scotland, with all mainland health boards now providing abortion to at least 20 weeks' gestation. Nevertheless, Gillian Mackay is right to push the Government and health boards to see what can be done even further on later-term abortions, and I am happy to ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care writes to her with further details of the actions that we, alongside health boards, are taking in that regard.

Once Gillian Mackay's bill has made its way through Parliament, we will begin a review of abortion law, which will focus on identifying potential proposals for reform.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Would the First Minister accept that no one is being harassed at those vigils and protests, and no one is being intimidated? It is largely a small group of elderly religious people who are standing outside those facilities. Does he not think that we are overreacting slightly with legislation on the matter?

The First Minister: I do not agree with John Mason on that, I am afraid. What is so important in this matter, particularly for men, is that we listen to the voices of women. Whatever John Mason's view might be, women have given powerful evidence and testimony that they feel that harm is being done: they do feel harassed and intimidated. Even if, for whatever reason, John Mason was to discard that evidence—and I encourage him not to—he should listen to the clinicians at the services, such as Dr Greg Irwin and many others, who have spoken powerfully about the impact that those protests are having on staff.

John Mason knows that I am a religious person. I pray. People can pray anywhere in the world, for whatever they want, so I do not understand why they have to go to an abortion service where women will then feel harassed and intimidated. Therefore, I believe that the legislation that Gillian Mackay has introduced should have the support of the whole Parliament. We in the Scottish Government will certainly support it.

I say once again to John Mason that it is crucial that, instead of imposing their view on what the impacts or effects of protests are on women, men listen to the voices of women, clinicians and staff at abortion services and that he would also do well to do so.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The protesters intimidate women at what is undoubtedly a challenging moment in their lives. Given the waiting list pressures across the NHS, has the First Minister had direct discussions with health boards to ensure that women can continue to access abortion services in a safe but timely manner, to avoid adding further anxiety to what is already a challenging time in their lives?

The First Minister: Carol Mochan is right to raise that issue. We do not want anybody waiting longer to access healthcare than they have to. We know that the wait is far too long for a range of issues that affect women.

In relation to the discussions that the Government and health boards have had on a range of issues that affect abortion and access to abortion services, and on some of the issues that Gillian Mackay raised, in which Carol Mochan might have an interest, in relation to later-term abortion, I am more than happy for the health secretary to write a detailed note to Carol Mochan. She is right to raise the issues that she raises, because nobody—particularly women who are accessing health services—should have to wait a minute longer than I am afraid they currently do.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Teacher Induction Scheme

5. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take in response to reported statistics showing that nearly one in five probationary teachers left the teacher induction scheme in 2023. (S6F-02921)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The teacher induction scheme is an important element of teacher education. It guarantees every eligible student teacher a one-year probation placement to allow them to meet the standard for full registration. Probation numbers fluctuate throughout the year due to deferrals and

withdrawals for a variety of reasons, including medical or personal ones, or due to extensions to the original initial teacher education qualification.

The strategic board for teacher education, which is made up of a range of key education stakeholders, is looking at issues around teacher recruitment, increasing support for early career teachers, and raising the profile of teaching as a valued profession.

Jamie Greene: I agree that the number fluctuates. However, the drop-out rate was 13 per cent before Covid and was nearer 19 per cent last year, which is an alarming rise. The Educational Institute of Scotland believes that, once teachers enter the workplace, they face the harsh realities that many in the profession have known for some time—increased workload, less support for teachers and pupils and a lack of permanent and secure jobs for many probationary teachers. On top of that is the rising violence and abuse towards teachers, which concerns all of us.

We already know that, since the First Minister's party took office, there are 1,000 fewer teachers in Scotland's classrooms, and we know about the direct impact that that has on subject choice and class sizes. Why does the First Minister think that so many probation teachers are dropping out of the profession so early in their career? More importantly, what is his Government doing about it?

The First Minister: Jamie Greene is right to raise that important issue, which will have cross-party interest. Many of the reasons that Jamie Greene gives for the fact that we might see deferrals or, indeed, withdrawals from teaching are absolutely correct. The issue of violence in schools is particularly high in our mind and in that of the teaching profession.

Again, I am happy for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to write to Jamie Greene with details of the actions that we are taking, from the summits that have taken place to the guidance and guidelines that we have provided schools and the support that we are providing in tackling that particular issue.

We are also trying to ensure that teaching is an attractive profession. One way of doing that is by ensuring that teachers in Scotland are the best paid in the United Kingdom, and that teacher starting salaries are the most attractive in the UK. We also provide a number of bursaries for teachers who will work in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—subjects. There is also the preference waiver scheme, through which teachers who are willing to complete their probation anywhere in Scotland can receive up to £8,000. We are also working with stakeholders on a joint campaign to encourage

people to consider teaching an attractive profession.

We are working on a range of issues, and I am more than happy for the education secretary to write to Jamie Greene with further detail of the actions that we are taking.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what urgent action is being taken to address long waits in A and E departments, in light of reports that over 7,300 patients waited for more than a day in 2023, with some waiting much longer. (S6F-02918)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I emphasise that all long waits are unacceptable. We continue to work hard with health boards to reduce delays for patients.

A and E performance is impacted by pressures from right across the wider health and social care system, which is why our unscheduled care collaborative programme is taking a whole-systems approach as we work with health boards in delivering sustained improvement. Through the programme, a range of actions is being taken to improve patient flows in order to reduce A and E delays. Those include actions to strengthen arrangements to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions, such as same-day emergency care services; expanding our hospital-at-home services; and optimising flow navigation centres. Those actions support patients, to ensure that they receive the right care in the right place while also reducing pressure on our very busy acute sites.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the First Minister for his response, but in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, one patient waited at A and E for 122 hours—that is five days. At Borders general hospital, the wait was 88 hours. In NHS Lanarkshire, someone waited more than 72 hours. Consultants—I repeat, consultants—tell me that patients are being treated on trolleys in corridors when they should be in a bed.

Let us be in no doubt that the long waits are costing lives. The First Minister does not have to take my word for it—the Royal College of Emergency Medicine estimates that up to 2,000 excess deaths were caused last year by patients waiting more than eight hours in emergency departments. Frankly, that is a national scandal. What action will be taken now to tackle long waits at A and E departments before more lives are lost?

The First Minister: I do not dispute, with either Jackie Baillie or the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, that there is a relationship between long waits and increased risk of harm. There

undoubtedly is, which is why we are absolutely committed to reducing those waits.

Some of the figures that were presented in the response to the freedom of information request were erroneous, not due to anything that Jackie Baillie has said but, I believe, due to some coding or recording errors. Nonetheless, Jackie Baillie remains correct that there are still—exceptionally, and not as the rule—people waiting far too long to be seen in A and E.

Jackie Baillie asked what action we will be taking. I am happy for the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to write to her in greater detail, but I can tell her now some of the actions that we are taking.

We are bolstering our support for NHS 24. We know that doing so can reduce the number of people who go to A and E. In fact, we have increased NHS 24 staffing levels by 65 per cent since 2007, and it is now a 24/7 service.

We are also expanding hospital at home. Leading into this winter, we provided 455 beds to enable more people to get treatment from home.

We are also increasing the A and E workforce to help with staffing levels. We are recruiting more and more A and E consultants to help with patient flow. In fact, there has been a 300 per cent increase in the number of A and E consultants under the Scottish National Party.

Another thing to which I would draw Jackie Baillie's attention is that we are looking to support social care, because we know how important that is for dealing with the delayed discharge issue. In a few weeks' time, those who work in social care will get a further pay rise from the Government of £12 an hour.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests; I am a practising NHS general practitioner.

As a GP, I see people who cannot wait in the A and E queue any longer. They come to me with chest pain and they come to me with signs of stroke, because they do not want to get into that queue. That puts huge pressure on me in general practice and on primary care. What can the First Minister do for us in primary care to ensure that we can deal with those patients?

The First Minister: I thank Dr Gulhane for the work that he does as a GP and, of course, I thank GPs across the country.

We are seeking to improve A and E performance, which has undoubtedly been impacted by the pandemic. That pressure is faced by A and E services across the UK. That is why we continue to seek to improve A and E

performance. Scotland's A and E departments are the best performing in the UK and have been for eight years.

On the support that we are providing, we are looking to ensure that we can take some pressure away from busy acute sites and busy primary care sites. That is why we are investing in NHS 24, hospital at home and increased staffing levels. We have a target to increase the head-count number of GPs and we have continued to make progress in that regard.

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

Breadalbane Street Fire

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Parliament will be aware of the concerning fire on Breadalbane Street in my constituency, where combustible cladding may have been a factor. Does the First Minister share my empathy for everyone affected and my gratitude to the many firefighters and other emergency service personnel who responded? Does the First Minister agree that this very worrying incident emphasises the importance of high-rise firefighting capability in urban areas and the extra funding for the fire service in the budget, and that it is vital that the Housing (Cladding Remediation) (Scotland) Bill and the cladding remediation programme are taken forward with urgency by Parliament, Government and developers?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with all that from Ben Macpherson, and I add my thanks to the emergency services, in particular the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, for their efforts. Those efforts meant that everybody—including, I think, Graham Simpson, who was there—was evacuated safely and without injury, so I am very pleased about that.

The situation is still evolving. Ben Macpherson is right that it is important that we continue to fund the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which is why there is an increase in its budget for 2024-25.

What Ben Macpherson says about cladding is incredibly important, and it is incredibly important that the bill continues to make progress—the stage 1 debate took place this week—and that all the stakeholders who have responsibility for cladding remediation take that responsibility seriously. They do not have to wait for the bill in order to take action.

David Hill

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): It is two years since we lost our friend and colleague David Hill while he was playing for the

Parliament rugby team in Dublin. His parents, Sharon and Roger, have been an inspiration. David's father, Roger, is currently on an epic cycling journey to deliver the match ball for the annual match between the Scottish and Irish Parliament teams, and to raise funds for and awareness of cardiac risk in the young. Roger has been joined by friends and family for parts of the journey, and he was even joined by you, Presiding Officer, as he left Edinburgh. Will the First Minister join me in giving everyone involved the very best of wishes, and will he pledge to consider any ways in which his Government can introduce screening to improve outcomes for people living with an undetected cardiac condition? *[Applause.]*

The First Minister: I join Douglas Lumsden in congratulating Sharon and Roger. I have had the pleasure of meeting them on a couple of occasions, most recently when they were at Parliament. They are incredible. I cannot think of a worse loss than losing a child. Nobody would begrudge Sharon and Roger just dealing privately with that grief, but they have instead chosen, in David's memory, to ensure that they raise awareness of undetected cardiac issues and cardiac risk in the young. For that, they absolutely deserve recognition, and they have the admiration of everybody across the Parliament.

I wish Roger well in the cycle that he is doing and pledge to look further at what we can possibly do in relation to screening for undetected cardiac issues. I am more than happy for the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to engage directly with Douglas Lumsden. I am sure that he will also engage with Sharon and Roger on those issues.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Bus Franchising)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Tomorrow, the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport board is set to approve bus franchising as part of its regional bus strategy, but the Scottish Government has cut SPT's capital budget for the coming year to zero. That cut will hamper SPT's ability to take our buses back under public control and deliver a better bus service for all of greater Glasgow. Does the First Minister welcome the bus franchise for greater Glasgow? If so, will he ensure that SPT has the funding necessary to ensure that it can be launched as soon as possible?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is because of legislation that was introduced by the Scottish National Party Government that bus franchising is possible. We are very pleased that we have enabled that to take place at a local level.

On our funding for local government, I remind the member that we are giving an increase in

budget to our local authorities. We are always happy to engage with our local authorities and their partners, such as SPT, to see what more we can do to ensure that our public transport is as accessible and affordable as possible. My colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will bring a debate to Parliament on the fair fares review, which, with the agreement of Parliament, will, I believe, be debated without a motion in order that we can have what I hope will be a good discussion on what further we can do to ensure that public transport—be it buses, railways or any other form of public transport—is as accessible and affordable as possible.

Horizon (United Kingdom Legislation)

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Does the First Minister share my extreme disappointment that Scotland will not be included in the United Kingdom Government's Horizon legislation, which was announced this week? Can he outline the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to right the injustice imposed on those living in Scotland who were profoundly affected by the Post Office Horizon scandal?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I absolutely share that sentiment from Audrey Nicoll. The Deputy First Minister has written to the UK Government to urge it to reconsider its decision, as have the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. There is real frustration. We stated publicly our preference for the legislation to apply UK-wide. It would have been the fairest and most equitable way to ensure fair treatment for sub-postmasters and mistresses in Scotland, as well as right across the UK.

If the UK Government does not change its position, we will introduce Scottish-specific legislation. The concern is that the Scottish legislation would have to align with the UK legislation, which will have to make its way through the UK Parliament. It will undoubtedly be amended in the various stages of that parliamentary process, which will inevitably have an impact on our ability to introduce legislation. We hope that that will not have an impact on Scottish sub-postmasters and mistresses being able to access the UK-wide compensation and payment that they are overdue.

We will introduce Scottish-specific legislation, but I again urge the UK Government to treat sub-postmasters and mistresses in Scotland the same as it is treating sub-postmasters and mistresses in England and Wales.

Autism (Mainstream Schooling)

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I recently met a constituent of mine in Glasgow called Michaela Holla, who told me about the serious concern that

she has for her autistic and non-verbal son, Logan. At five years old, he is due to start school in August. It is quite clear that, due to his development delay and other challenges relating to autism, he will be unable to cope in a mainstream school. The paediatricians, neurologists and other medical professionals who know Logan agree. However, Glasgow City Council has declared that no alternatives are available to Logan, and that he must start mainstream school later this year. There is no route for appeal to contest that decision. It is a totally unacceptable situation that risks harming Logan and causing his family considerable anxiety. Will the First Minister work with me to look again at the case to see whether a more suitable alternative for this vulnerable young boy can be found?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am happy for Annie Wells to furnish me and the Government with the detail of Logan's case, with the permission of Logan's mother, Michaela. If she does, we will happily consult the local authority. Such decisions are made locally. However, it is also important that we take on board the expert opinion of local clinicians. That is where the issue is perhaps concerning because, in her question, Annie Wells suggests that those clinical opinions are not being taken into account. If Annie Wells could furnish me and the Government with the details of Logan's case, with Michaela's permission, we will look into it and see whether we can be of any assistance.

Brain Tumour Awareness Month

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): March is brain tumour awareness month. I thank the First Minister for agreeing to join in the Brain Tumour Research "Wear a hat" day photo call immediately after First Minister's question time, and I hope that all MSPs here will be able to join us, too.

Brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer. Despite that devastating impact, this area of cancer research is underfunded, and there are more than 150 different types of brain tumour. What can the First Minister say about increasing funding to find improved treatments and, ultimately, cures?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Beatrice Wishart for all her efforts in this regard, and I look forward to the photo call shortly after First Minister's question time.

I put on record my thanks to all those who seek to use their own experience to speak out about brain tumours, the need to be cautious and the need to be conscious of getting support where necessary. I think of the case of Glenn Campbell,

the BBC journalist who is well known by members right across the chamber. He has used his experience and his voice to raise awareness of brain tumours.

I am more than happy for the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to write to Beatrice Wishart with further details, but I note that we are increasing funding to the national health service this year to more than £19.5 billion, which is record funding for the NHS. I know just how seriously our NHS colleagues right across the country take the issue of tackling all cancers, including neurological and brain cancers.

Young Carers Action Day 2024

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The visitors in the public gallery are all very welcome. If you are leaving, please do so quickly and quietly, because we are about to go on to our next item of business. Thank you very much for your co-operation.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12162, in the name of Karen Adam, on young carers action day 2024. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes what it sees as the importance of the Carers Trust annual Young Carers Action Day, which takes place on 13 March 2024; further notes that the Young Carers Action Day 2024 theme is "fair futures for young carers", which, it understands, will focus on why caring should not be a barrier to learning, earning or being able to get on in life, and thanks young carers for what it sees as the positive role that they play in providing kinship care and the positive role that they place in society.

12:48

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Bringing this debate to the Scottish Parliament is such a moving moment for me, particularly because we welcome dozens of young carers to the public gallery. Among our visitors are two very special young women who, due to their initiative, have made the debate happen. I thank their teacher for supporting them—she is obviously doing a fantastic job. I am so glad that they can all be with us today.

I dedicate my words to those young carers who are unable to be with us, perhaps because of their caring responsibilities, and to those who, without realising its importance or truly understanding what their role means, see their caregiving as simply what needs to be done in their family.

As a young girl, I seldom called myself a carer, but, as a CODA—a child of a deaf adult—acting as an interpreter and advocating for my deaf father as he navigated life in a hearing world became second nature to me, as it did for many of my CODA friends who were supporting their deaf family members.

As we go about our daily routines, whether that involves driving to work, dropping the kids off at school or just nipping to the shop, around us, working quietly throughout the day, are young carers—children and young people whose mornings might have begun much earlier than many of ours. In the quiet of their homes, they might have assisted a parent with a physical disability, which might have involved preparing breakfast for them and, perhaps, their siblings;

helping a parent to wash; offering strength and comfort to a parent who is grappling with mental health challenges; and buffering and mitigating many of the effects that come with disability or illness.

Many of the young people who are watching us from the gallery and countless others across Scotland find themselves in a world where roles are reversed—a world in which those young people, who are so full of love and devotion, are shouldering burdens that would weigh heavily on many adults.

Imagine the young lad who, before he thinks of schoolwork or socialising with his peers, ensures his sibling's medical needs are met, or the young girl who, instead of scrolling through social media in the way that her peers do, checks in on her mother's wellbeing and provides comfort and encouragement, showing a maturity well beyond her years. Those are not just acts of duty; they are profound expressions of love and commitment, which are performed against the backdrop of youth.

The two pupils who contacted my office to discuss the lack of resources for young carers in our area showed sheer determination from the outset, and their advocacy for young carers was nothing short of inspiring. We chatted in my office for about an hour, putting plans into action. When I was their age, I doubt that I would have had the initiative to approach my elected representative, let alone advocate so eloquently for the needs of others. Such conversations stand out in our careers as parliamentarians, so it is truly a privilege to bring this subject to the chamber for debate and to pay tribute to them.

Yesterday, we marked young carers action day. I do not want us simply to celebrate the remarkable young individuals in question, although we should do that, and often. I want us to provide young carers with the support that they so rightfully deserve.

The theme of this year's young carers action day is "fair futures for young carers". That theme has been chosen because young carers are fighting a battle on two fronts: managing their caregiving responsibilities; and navigating the trials and tribulations of growing up. It is imperative that caring responsibilities do not become barriers to learning, earning or simply being able to move forward in life.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I am grateful to Karen Adam for taking an intervention on this important topic.

Last night, in Perth College, I took part in a question time on young carers action week. A point that was put to me was about the importance of the education system understanding the

circumstances of young carers, and of ensuring that its approach reflects and takes account of the additional demands that Karen Adam is so powerfully putting on the record this afternoon. Does Karen Adam agree that it is important that our education system understands the particular needs of the young carers who are part of our education system?

Karen Adam: Yes, I absolutely agree with my colleague John Swinney on that point. I will discuss education later in my speech. The education system needs to make allowances and provision for, and provide extra support for, young carers.

Many young carers feel that they are missing out on large parts of their childhood. Caring can also have a serious impact on a young person's health and wellbeing, their ability to learn—as my colleague pointed out—and their long-term future. According to Carers Trust Scotland, more than half of young carers in Scotland say that they feel worried about their future, and 43 per cent of young carers and young adult carers in Scotland say that caring “always” or “usually” affects how much time they can spend with friends. That is not surprising, but it is something that we must help with, and I will dedicate a portion of my speech to the point about the ability of young carers to learn—their education.

Learning environments play a crucial role in supporting and developing young people who have caring responsibilities. Schools, colleges and universities must be understanding and supportive of young carers, too many of whom feel that that is not currently the case. One in three young carers say that they struggle to balance their caring responsibilities with their education, and young adult carers are 38 per cent less likely to achieve a university degree—sadly, those who care for 35 or more hours a week are 86 per cent less likely to do so, and are 46 per cent less likely to enter employment than their peers.

We need to do our utmost to ensure that young carers have access to learning and training opportunities and that they succeed in their education and employment. They must also have time to themselves, which is so important for their mental health. Above all, young carers must feel that they have a choice in their lives.

I am glad to see that the Scottish Government provides a young carer grant. However, a leading carers charity says that many young people who look after others

“do not recognise themselves to be carers.”

As I said, they see the support that they give as just a regular part of family life. As a result, they do not know that they are entitled to that benefit. I

therefore hope that we can promote it as much as possible today.

The motion that we are debating is a call to action, not just a call for recognition. The care that so many of the young people in the public gallery and beyond provide to their families, and the contribution that they make to our society more broadly, are invaluable. *[Applause.]*

12:56

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank my colleague Karen Adam for bringing this important debate to the chamber. As we have heard, the theme of this year's young carers action day is “fair futures for young carers”, which is about removing the barriers that young carers face and that their peers may not face.

Recently, it was my absolute pleasure to visit the Stirling young carers service, which works in my constituency. I am delighted that Esther Keane and Cara Barber are in the public gallery. I am also delighted that Robert Cairney joins us with his mum, Ann. Robert volunteers with the service and was a young carer himself.

Caring can be a very positive experience but, without the right support, there can be negative impacts on young carers. That is why organisations such as the Stirling young carers service are so important. It told me that young carers often experience stress, tiredness and anxiety due to their caring role. In turn, they can find it hard to concentrate at school and keep up with their school work and homework. They can also feel isolated and miss out on social experiences with their peers.

We in the Stirling constituency are very lucky to have the Stirling young carers service, which runs rural groups. Rurality is a barrier to accessing support. Organisations across Scotland, including in Stirling, are doing excellent work at breaking down such barriers. The Stirling young carers service currently supports more than 150 young carers; 59 of those are in rural groups, and 29 young carers receive one-to-one support to help them to manage stress. However, the service pointed out that young people cannot access support if they do not know that they are young carers.

Robert Cairney has been volunteering with the Stirling young carers service for six years. Robert is so passionate about his volunteering. He is an amazing young man. He also helped to care for and support his twin brother. As a child, however, he felt that it was “just his brother” and that it was very natural to do the things that he did for him. Only later did he realise that taking on such responsibilities meant that he was classed as a young carer.

The carers census found that

“89% of young carers experienced an impact on their emotional well-being due to their caring role.”

When someone does not know that they are a young carer, they miss out on so much support, including financial support such as the young carer grant. That is especially important when 15 per cent of young carers live in the most deprived areas in Scotland.

In order to address that, Stirling young carers are working in schools to help to spread awareness of what it means to be a young carer, and to design continuing professional development for school staff. They would also like to see mandatory training for teachers and school staff, similar to that offered on safeguarding. That could make a huge difference, especially in the light of research from Carers Trust Scotland that suggests that nearly half of young carers do not get enough help to balance caring and their education.

I thank Stirling young carers and their volunteers, such as Robert, and the thousands of young carers across Scotland for the tireless work that they do.

If you are a teenager aged between 16 and 18 with a caring role, you may be entitled to a young carers grant and other support. It is worrying that Scottish Government figures suggest that around 25 per cent of those eligible for a young carers grant in 2022-23 did not apply. If you are unsure and are a local constituent of mine, please get in touch.

13:01

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am delighted to speak in today’s debate to support young carers action day. I thank Karen Adam for bringing forward the debate.

Young carers have something to be very proud of. They sacrifice so much to care for someone they love. These young people are often certain that they have been shaped into the person that they are by their caring role. They gain a heightened sense of empathy, develop acute observation skills and have experiences that come together to form a more caring nature. That is something to celebrate, and we must all do more to support those who encounter challenges that their peers do not. It is important that we acknowledge their different experiences and commend their hard work.

As Karen Adam did, I point out that many people do not understand that they are carers. I asked my daughter recently, as she was doing up my laces, “Are you a young carer?” She rolled her eyes and said “No.” There are many people who

do so much, whether for siblings or parents, who are carers, but who—as both previous speakers said—simply do not acknowledge that.

It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to thank my siblings for the extra support that they gave me as I grew up.

Young carers have plenty on their plate. As well as being in school, their caring work can often involve cooking, providing emotional support, running a household, shopping, dispensing medicine and giving personal care. In the light of young carers action day, it is good to take a moment to think about what a caring role means for a young person’s life.

Some struggle with being seen as different by their friends at school, which can lead to social isolation. That can be made worse by the fact that young carers often do not have as much free time to meet up with their friends as other young people do. They can sense a loss of carefreeness; they can lose that innocence much earlier than others. We should acknowledge that and do everything that we can to support them.

The theme this year is “Fair futures for young carers”. As others have acknowledged in the debate, the best way to facilitate that is through education. It is so important that young carers are properly supported in school and that they are not disadvantaged for the future. We must take that need seriously. It must be heard not simply by this Parliament but, more importantly, by local authority education departments, headteachers and teachers at every level of school.

Many of us have the privilege of going along to the camp that is run for young carers every year. However, I am shocked to have heard the same message for the past seven years. Young carers often struggle to stay awake, because they have been up all night. They struggle to get their homework in on time, because they have had caring responsibilities. Sadly, teachers often do not take that into account and so young carers are disadvantaged. I know that there are no simple answers, but there must be a way for us to identify young carers and give them the extra support that they require, to ensure that, as Karen Adam pointed out, they do not miss out on future job, college or university opportunities.

Young carers are among the best of us, and we owe it to them to provide us with as much support as we can. To that end, I encourage all members to sign the young carers covenant and to move forward together, towards a fairer future for young carers. It is the least that they deserve.

13:05

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Karen Adam for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

On behalf of Scottish Labour, I thank young carers across Scotland for everything that they do, and I reiterate our support for them. We welcome the Carers Trust's annual young carers action day and recognise the impact of the work that the trust has carried out across the United Kingdom and here in Scotland.

As the motion states, it is right that caring should not become

“a barrier to learning, earning or being able to get on in life”,

although I appreciate that that might be the challenging reality for many young carers here in Scotland. It is therefore incumbent on all of us in the Parliament to remove those barriers whenever we can.

As other members have said, it is apt that the theme of this year's action day is “Fair futures for young carers”, because, ultimately, the issue comes down to fairness. As we have heard during the debate, young carers currently do not get a fair deal. The barriers to their learning or earning are such that taking on caring responsibilities means making sacrifices that will have lasting impacts. There is no equality or fairness in that; it is an injustice. As we have heard, we should all be determined to help to overcome that.

The Carers Trust's most recent report showed that extremely concerning figures have emerged from research carried out in Scotland. We should ensure that we are all aware of those. Half of young carers who work struggle to balance caring duties with their paid work. More than half of them are usually or always stressed because they are young carers. Two thirds feel that the cost of living crisis always or usually affects them and their families.

Those facts represent important information that young carers are giving us, and we must take them seriously. They must act as a wake-up call, because they are not just figures; they represent the individual stories of young people across Scotland who are genuinely struggling to balance their caring duties with work and education, and who are feeling the impacts on their emotional and mental health.

Our excellent young carers should not find themselves in such a position, but it is a reality. The Government must reflect on those important pieces of information. Waiting lists for mental health services in Scotland remain far too long, and young people continue to suffer as they wait for appointments that they need urgently.

Those challenges are exacerbated by the UK Government's handling of the economy, which has created a cost of living crisis that, as we have heard from young carers themselves, adds anxiety and stress to individuals' and families' situations. Governments must accept responsibility and accountability for their own discussions and actions and, of course, their failings. When they do so, we can properly engage in co-operative action and overcome those significant and worrying challenges.

A further key area that has been raised by young carers and by members during the debate is the balancing of caring responsibilities with education. Schools, colleges and universities must be more flexible in supporting young carers to be able to carry out their duties but still have the ability to achieve their goals.

I recognise that I am running out of time, but there is so much more to say on the issue. Once again, I thank Scotland's young carers for the tremendous contribution that they make, not just to their families but right across Scotland. It is important for us to hear their voices, and Karen Adam's securing of today's debate has allowed us to do that. I commit my party to continuing to support a cross-party approach to the matter.

13:10

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Karen Adam for securing this important members' business debate. I, too, extend my gratitude to young carers across Scotland, including those who are joining us in the public gallery this afternoon, for the incredible work that they do in looking after their loved ones.

Yesterday, we celebrated young carers action day, and I commend the immense contribution that young carers make to our society when caring for their family and loved ones. As others have said, many young carers would not think twice about what it is that they do, but we need to think deeply about how we support them properly. Caring for someone should not be a barrier to equal opportunities in learning or participating in life, especially at a young age. Much too often, young carers' lives are further complicated by education and employment systems that fail to identify and understand the diversity of their caring roles or to respond to their support needs. We need to address issues for young adult carers in that regard, too. For some, any good support that was provided at school stops when they leave, and those carers need to start again when they are at college or university or in the workplace.

Carers Trust research found that 59 per cent of young carers in Scotland care for more than 20 hours each week, with 12 per cent of them

spending 50 hours or more providing unpaid care on a weekly basis. I welcome the launch by Carers Trust of the first-ever UK-wide covenant for young carers and young adult carers, which has been shaped by the views of more than 500 young carers. I thank Carers Trust for allowing me to attend the launch of the covenant earlier this week, and I encourage everyone in the chamber to sign up to it.

We heard from young carers from across the UK about their experience and what they want to see for young and young adult carers. The session was led by young carers, who did a wonderful job of articulating not only their experience but the experience that they had gathered from others. They told us that young carers need lasting and meaningful change. We must ensure that they remain at the forefront of policy development and have access to the support that they are entitled to and deserve. In Scotland, they must have a fair chance to prosper in all aspects of their lives so that they can achieve their full potential and secure a fair future.

Karen Adam is correct to say that we need to provide opportunities for those young people to be young people. I have been hugely privileged to attend the young carers festival, which allows young carers to take a break from their caring responsibilities and provides them with a space to see friends and have their voices heard.

There was also an opportunity to ask questions of MSPs, and I was struck by the number of issues that young carers wanted to ask me about. I was totally prepared for questions about caring and access to services, but many of them were asking questions about other issues completely unrelated to their caring responsibilities that they were passionate about. It struck me that that is actually what the young carers festival is partly about: allowing young people to get into things that interest them. It was an enlightening experience, even if the young carers absolutely put me through my paces and challenged my policy knowledge. If anyone here gets the chance to go to the festival, they absolutely should.

I will take this opportunity to shine a light on some of the incredible work that is going on across central Scotland that is aimed at benefiting young carers. At the Falkirk and Clackmannanshire carers centre, the organisation offers support tailored to the needs of young carers aged from eight to 18. That includes a support group, which provides monthly sessions that give young carers a rest from their caring responsibilities and a chance to connect with peers who understand their experiences.

In North and South Lanarkshire, young carers are dedicated to supporting the experiences of other young carers across the region. Their

mission involves raising awareness and identifying and offering direct support to those who care for family members with illness or disability, including those who care for parents with mental health or substance abuse issues.

I extend my very best wishes to all those who are involved in this year's young carers action day in their endeavours. Young carers action day serves as an important reminder of the invaluable contributions that young carers make to our communities and to their families, and of the urgent need for support and recognition of their vital role. Together we must amplify their voices, champion their rights and work tirelessly towards a more inclusive and supportive society, in which every young carer feels valued and empowered.

13:14

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I also thank my colleague Karen Adam for bringing this important debate to the chamber and extend my heartfelt gratitude to all our young carers throughout Scotland, including those from South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire in my Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley constituency. Some of them are in the gallery today. I thank all of them.

I first met the young people from South Ayrshire young carers back in June, when I attended a screening of their brilliant short film entitled "The Weekend" at South Ayrshire county buildings. I have always been in awe of the resilience, determination and love shown by our young carers, but nothing prepared me for how blown away I was to be by the film itself and by the young people when they took the time to explain to me how the film came about and gave me an insight into their daily lives. I came away totally humbled and determined to help to amplify their voices in the Parliament.

I am delighted by the success that their young carer awareness-raising film has garnered. Initially, the film was intended only for local use, but it is now raising awareness of young carers throughout Scotland and the United Kingdom. I was very impressed to learn that the film was entirely co-produced, with the young carers starring in, writing, producing and directing it. I give a big thanks to the local social enterprise film company The Iris and South Ayrshire Council for recognising the value of co-production. It empowers in a way that simply telling a story cannot.

The film is a poignant and thought-provoking illustration of the life of young carers through their own eyes. It tells the story of three young people as they navigate their lives and caring roles over a single weekend. It is important that the film

contains a story about parental substance use, which the young people have been praised for including. I hope that that will help to challenge persistent stigma and encourage children and young people in such a situation to come forward for support as young carers.

The film has since received several accolades, including winning the Scottish public service award for diversity and inclusion and winning the Scotland and north-east England regional final of the Great British care awards in the unpaid carer category. The young people will head to the UK finals later this month and I am sure that members will join me in wishing them the best of luck. They are also finalists in the YouthLink Scotland awards for equality and diversity later this year.

It is important that the film is now included in continuous professional development learning modules for Education Scotland and Carers Trust Scotland. That has really helped to raise the profile of young carers locally and nationally. Through their work with schools, the film supports young people to self-identify as young carers, to ensure that they get support to achieve equity with their peers, and gives those who are not carers an insight into the lives and everyday experiences of young carers. It challenges assumptions and improves peer understanding, which is absolutely vital. The authenticity from co-production and the pioneering content have produced a resource that is changing the lives of children and families throughout the country.

I will see whether I can get the film shared with MSPs because, as the legislators of the land, it is important that we hear directly from young people. It is exciting that the young people are now working with primary-age children to make a film that is suitable for their age and stage. The young people involved in "The Weekend" are involved as peer mentors in that new project. I think that that is amazing.

On national support for young carers, the young people told me about how important it is to have protected funding for young carers at a local level and for young carer training to be made mandatory for education and social work, alongside the statutory child protection training. They need to be seen, to be heard and to be supported. We need to actively demonstrate that we care for the carers and that we all have a responsibility to ensure that those young people are supported in their caring roles and that they are supported just to be kids. That means recognising what supports need to be put in place to truly provide the equity that gives them real equality and a fair future.

13:19

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague on securing this debate. It is a privilege to speak in it and I welcome the young carers who are here today.

There are around 1 million young carers aged 17 or under in the UK, so, if we extrapolate that based on population numbers, that means that there are approximately 100,000 young carers in Scotland, which I am sure is an underestimate.

I apologise at this stage in the debate to you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and to those in the gallery, for duplicating any points that have already been made, but they deserve to be repeated.

Who is a young carer? That is a tricky question, because many who look after siblings or adults in their family would not identify themselves as carers and some might wish to keep quiet about it, perhaps out of fear of interference from social work.

Young carers usually know who they are, but, for public consumption, a young carer is someone under 18 who helps to look after a friend or someone in their family who is ill, disabled or misuses drugs or alcohol. They can have emotional as well as practical caring responsibilities and the level of single-handed responsibility that is sometimes placed on young carers would be daunting even for an adult. They do cleaning, laundry, washing, food shopping, lifting and cooking. They offer financial and practical management by withdrawing cash and paying bills. They give intimate care such as washing, bathing and giving medication. They do sibling care, looking after a brother or sister, and so on. The condition of the person that they care for is often not obvious, so people do not think that the young person needs help.

I understand why young carers do not want to be different from their peers or to draw attention to their caring role. Understandably, they might want to keep their identity at school or college separate from their caring role. They might feel that they cannot discuss it with their friends or they might not have an opportunity to share their story. They are worried about bullying and, as I have said, that the family might be split up and that they themselves might be taken into care. They might want their caring to be kept secret because they are embarrassed.

Some young carers look after more than one person and they might also have health issues of their own. Some begin giving care at a very young age, while others can become carers overnight.

I was once a teacher and the role of the class teacher is important. I looked at the Carers Trust toolkit for young carers in education, which is a resource for identifying and supporting young carers. They can be distracted by, for example, checking their phone, not for trivial reasons but to check that the person they care for is okay. They can become quiet and withdrawn. They get no time to study at home, due to a hectic or chaotic home life and they can come back to school with their homework undone. Should the teacher be taking them to task, or should they be working out what is behind it? Carers feel pressured to remain in the caring role rather than progressing into further education, which is a division of their loyalties.

There is helpful guidance for teachers on the Carers Trust Scotland website. The most important thing is that teachers should be aware. They might notice a change in the behaviour of one of their pupils and ask themselves what lies behind it. There is also young carers awareness training for teachers, which is so important for helping practitioners, student teachers and probationers know what to look out for.

One key thing is to change the narrative. We should celebrate young carers and the valuable work that they do. It is a positive thing to be a young carer, but it is important to be recognised for that.

There is a duty for local authorities, although I do not have time to go into that. Both Midlothian and Borders councils have guidance for young carers on their websites.

I will finish with this: it is time that we all came together to make a change and to create a fair future for young carers. The young carers covenant, which I have read, will do exactly that. That is why I have signed it.

13:24

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Karen Adam for initiating this important debate on young carers action day, and I thank all members for being here to discuss the vital contribution that young carers make to society.

As so often, my colleague Karen Adam has absolutely brought the issue to life, partly because of her lived experience. She has given us immense insight into the situation for young carers and has used her lived experience to advocate change. It has been really powerful to hear her story and the testimonies that she has shared.

Young carers action day, which took place yesterday, is a valuable annual event, not only because it puts a spotlight on the important issues

that young carers face but because it allows us to hear directly from young carers themselves. In fact, more than 50 young carers are in the Parliament today to learn about how they can create change and to speak about what they need from us, as decision makers. At last year's young carers festival, I heard first hand how this year's theme of a fairer future for young carers is a crucial focus for many, and they expressed both their excitement and their apprehension at looking forward and planning for their future.

As I said, it is really important that the Parliament is given the opportunity to acknowledge the positive role that is played by young carers in our society, and to reflect on some of the pressures that they face. In that respect, we welcome the young carers covenant, which has been launched by the Carers Trust as part of young carers action day. The covenant will require a cross-Government commitment, so I absolutely commit to engaging with my ministerial colleagues on the Scottish Government's signing up to it, and I encourage others who work with young carers to sign up, too.

The statements in the covenant align with the policies and actions that we already have in place to recognise and support young carers, as set out in the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and our national carers strategy, and I am grateful for the opportunity to mention some of the actions that we are taking to support young carers and to ensure that caring is not a barrier to achieving their future goals.

In 2022, we published our Scottish Government "National Carers Strategy". Now into the second year of implementation, the strategy sets out our approach to addressing the current issues that all carers face, as well as a long-term vision for building a sustainable future for young carers. We recognise in the strategy that young carers' education and future prospects are incredibly important. Indeed, that is why we fully fund an education officer at Carers Trust Scotland and why we will continue to work with education colleagues to ensure that young carers are seen and supported in schools.

I agree with John Swinney and others about the flexibility and extra support that are needed for children and young people in education, and I agree with the point about raising awareness so that people self-identify as carers. Although we have a young carers identification awareness-raising campaign that runs around the young carers festival and the young carers action day, my personal view is that the system needs to be just a little bit more automatic, as that would solve a couple of problems. Very often, the person whom the young people are caring for is well known to the system—they might well be a brother

or sister who is also in the education system. Why not automatically recognise and identify brothers and sisters as part of their care? Proactively offering them support means that we do not have to wait for them to identify themselves, and I am keen to pursue that issue with education colleagues.

As well as working with education colleagues, we have been working with Skills Development Scotland and employers on projects such as the Carer Positive scheme to ensure that, when young carers are ready to join the world of work, that flexibility and support continue to be available to them. Many young carers tell us that they receive invaluable support from their local carer and young carer services, so we fund the Coalition of Carers in Scotland and Carers Trust Scotland to support carer centres and young carer services and to collaborate on building capacity.

Alongside their core local funding, we provided £560,000 in 2023-24 for local carer centres to expand their support to carers, including young carers. We have provided £3.5 million specifically for short breaks. Being able to take a break as a young carer is key to ensuring that they get time to pursue their hobbies, manage their wellbeing and get other opportunities that will support them with their future goals.

I reassure Gillian Mackay and others who made the same point that we will establish a right to breaks from caring through the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill in order to support people, protect their wellbeing and ensure that caring relationships are sustained. The bill will create a right to personalised breaks and support for any carer who is not currently able to access sufficient breaks. However, we are not waiting for the bill to be passed; we are acting now to expand easy-access short breaks ahead of the legislation. As well as the short breaks fund, we fund the Young Scot young carers package and the annual young carers festival to help young carers to have some form of break, to pursue opportunities and to have fun.

Improving support for unpaid carers is an absolute priority for our social security powers. Despite our fixed budgets and our limited powers of devolution, we have transformed social security provision in Scotland and delivered a system that is based on our principles of dignity, fairness and respect.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The young carer grant has been a fantastic addition to the social security landscape in Scotland. The minister talks about fairness. There is a slight unfairness in eligibility. Siblings or people in the same household need to choose between themselves who applies and qualifies for the young carer grant, even if they both provide the

same level of care. Will the minister consider extending the criteria slightly, so that siblings in the same household could both qualify?

Maree Todd: Mark Griffin will be aware that social security powers do not lie in my portfolio, but I am more than happy to raise that issue with colleagues. As I said, responding to young carers' needs will require a cross-Government approach, and I am more than happy to raise such issues and see what we can do to improve the situation.

We want to ensure that caring is not a barrier to young people succeeding in life. Since 2019, we have invested about £3.3 million and made more than 10,000 payments of our young carer grant, which is unique to Scotland and provides young carers with an annual payment of more than £350 to spend as they choose. That gives them direct control over how best to support themselves and allows them to access life opportunities and activities that are more typical for their peers.

We recognise the importance of young carers having access to education, and our recently launched carer support payment expands access to many carers in full-time education who are currently unable to get carers allowance. The payment will benefit up to 1,500 carers a year once it is available nationally.

We will continue to engage with carers of all ages, including young carers, to inform future improvements to the carer support payment. All the work that I mentioned has been guided by young carers telling us what they need, and we will continue to listen to young carers to shape our work.

I acknowledge members' contributions. The debate has been fabulous. The issues have been brought to life, and there were lots of wonderful references to the young people in the gallery. Most important, I acknowledge the huge contribution that young carers across Scotland make. I reiterate the Scottish Government's commitment to doing what we can to ensure that they have access to the support that they deserve when they need it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:33

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio on this occasion is social justice. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Scottish Child Payment (Uptake)

1. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to promote the uptake of the Scottish child payment. (S6O-03198)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our game-changing Scottish child payment is putting money into the pockets of the families of more than 327,000 children, with £573 million having been paid since launch. We are encouraged to see the latest estimates of take-up rates, which show that take-up for all children aged under 16 at the end of March 2023 was 83 per cent. However, we know that there is always more that we can do. Social Security Scotland continuously promotes the Scottish child payment across multiple channels including social media, marketing and news releases; via key stakeholders; and through the distribution of promotional materials to partners including libraries, nurseries and schools.

Marie McNair: Will the cabinet secretary comment on the impact that the payment is having on keeping children in Scotland out of poverty? Does she share my concerns about the Westminster Government's two-child policy undermining our efforts? Will she be clear that the two-child policy and its abhorrent rape clause will never be considered for the Scottish child payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I confirm to the member that the Scottish child payment is available for every eligible child. Modelling suggests that Scottish Government policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, which includes keeping 60,000 children out of poverty through the Scottish child payment.

The member is quite right: the UK Government could do so much more. It could lift a further 40,000 children out of poverty next year if it made key changes to social security, including reversing the two-child limit and introducing an essentials guarantee. It is disappointing that the spring

budget held none of those policies and that, therefore, those children will remain in poverty due to Westminster's inactivity.

Housing (Empty Properties)

2. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to bring empty properties back into use for housing. (S6O-03199)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): We continue to tackle empty homes as a priority, bringing more homes back into use as warm, safe and secure housing. Our interventions have been recognised by an independent audit that endorses the £3.2 million investment in the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which has seen over 9,000 privately owned homes successfully returned to use. That is why I was pleased to announce yesterday a further £423,000 of funding to support that important work in 2024-25.

Mr Briggs will be aware that I wrote to Parliament in September to outline the further actions that we are taking to enhance our approach. Those actions reflect the wide range of complex circumstances that have to be addressed.

Miles Briggs: I agree that we need a real call to action to bring the estimated 43,000 empty homes in Scotland back into use. Shelter has done some welcome work in England to support councils to bring homes back. Here in Edinburgh, in my area, there are 3,000 council-owned empty properties. What work will the Scottish Government do to help councils to fund projects to bring properties back? Has the Scottish Government looked at an empty homes refurbishment fund, for example, to enable councils to bid for money to do that?

Paul McLennan: The member mentioned the Edinburgh situation. When I met the City of Edinburgh Council last week, we talked about what we can do about the number of voids, which are empty homes. We have asked the council for proposals on that and we will see how we can work with it.

I mentioned the further £423,000 of funding to support important work in 2024-25. I am happy to continue to discuss the matter with the member.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In much of rural and island Scotland, derelict and empty properties litter the landscape. Does the minister agree that bringing such properties back into habitation is both vital to reinvigorate communities and, in most instances, considerably less expensive than new-build housing? What progress has been made over the past year and will be made in the next year to deliver on that objective?

Paul McLennan: I have been engaging closely with local authorities, housing providers and businesses in rural areas to support the delivery of more affordable homes across rural and island areas, and to consider how we can make best use of our existing supply. Our “Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan” supports the delivery of the Scottish Government’s commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, of which 10 per cent will be in rural and island areas.

The plan recognises that, alongside the delivery of new homes for rural and island communities, existing homes are a key part of our approach, including bringing empty homes back into active use.

Deafblindness Definition (Social Security Scotland)

3. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has undertaken regarding the incorporation of the definition of deafblindness into the work of Social Security Scotland. (S6O-03200)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland works with individuals and disability organisations to design services, and every stage of the application process has been tested. The initial equality impact assessment for communication support for deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing Social Security Scotland clients was completed in May 2022. People can apply in ways that suit them best, either by phone, online or paper application form, and local delivery advisers offer in-person support in every local authority area.

We are committed to continually improving our delivery of benefits, and the people of Scotland can be assured that that will be based on dignity, fairness and respect.

Roz McCall: The cross-party group on deafness, of which I am deputy convener, has worked tirelessly towards the adoption in Scotland of a definition of deafblindness. That definition is the Nordic model—it has been accepted in the United Kingdom since 1985, and it is the recognised definition across the European Union, with which the Scottish Government has frequently stated that it wishes to align.

My question is simple: will the Scottish Government reassess its position not to recognise the definition of deafblindness, so that people across Scotland are clear on what they may or may not be eligible for?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I appreciate that there is an on-going campaign on the formal definition of deafblindness, and recently there has been a members’ business debate on the matter. I

am happy to hear from Roz McCall in greater detail on the issue, as, I am sure, are colleagues in Social Security Scotland. While the campaign may be on-going, it is important that we continue the dialogue and our discussions to ensure that we support every client who comes to Social Security Scotland.

As I said, I am happy to carry on that dialogue, as I am sure the agency is, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has not been lodged.

Social Housing Waiting Lists (Disabled People)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce social housing waiting lists for disabled people. (S6O-03202)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Government has led the United Kingdom on housing by delivering more than 126,000 affordable homes since 2007, more than 89,000 of which were for social rent, including almost 24,000 council homes. We will also invest £556 million in affordable housing in 2024-25, the majority of which will be for social rent.

We remain focused on delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. To support that, we will bring forward a review that was scheduled for 2026-27 to 2024, which will concentrate on deliverability. We are also working with the financial community in Scotland and elsewhere to boost private sector investment and help deliver more homes.

There is also a role for local authorities in preparing their local housing strategies. I am discussing that with them to identify, first, what the waiting lists are and, secondly, the actions that they are undertaking in that regard.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister might be aware that in North Lanarkshire, 1,170 disabled people, many of whom are children, are currently stuck on social housing waiting lists. Instead of taking the issue seriously, the Scottish National Party Government has chosen to slash the housing budget by more than £200 million in the past year. How does the minister expect to cut those lists when social house building is being discouraged by his own Government’s cuts?

Paul McLennan: I will come to that point in a second.

A key element of our approach was the launch in June last year of the consultation on “Housing for Varying Needs: a design guide”, which related to new builds—the consultation closed in December.

When we talk about investment in social housing, there are a couple of points of context to highlight. One is that we build 40 per cent more affordable homes than England does, and 70 per cent more than Wales does.

There is a 10 per cent capital budget cut from the member's Government—*[Interruption.]* Obviously, the member has no influence on that whatsoever. It was a choice by the Tory Government to cut the capital budget allocation to the Scottish Government—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, can you resume your seat?

It started with a question being heckled, disappointingly, by some who had already been invited to ask a question. The answers are now likewise being heckled. We are not going to get through this item of business if that continues.

Minister, please continue.

Paul McLennan: I mentioned the 10 per cent capital budget cut. There was also a dramatic cut to the financial transactions, which gave us flexibility. We spend £90 million a year on discretionary housing payments—again, due to policies by your Government. If those payments were removed, we would have £90 million extra to invest in the houses that you are talking about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please, minister.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The minister will be aware of the "Dying in the margins" work by Marie Curie and the University of Glasgow, which has reinforced the significant demand for adapted properties for people who are diagnosed with a terminal illness. When someone passes, there is an impact on their family when they have to move out of an adapted property very quickly.

What will the Government do to engage with that piece of work to ensure a sufficiency of adapted properties and support for people who are grieving?

Paul McLennan: The member's question is well timed. I spoke to Ellie Wagstaff at an event last night, and she talked about that particular project.

I have been doing a piece of work with MND Scotland, which supports people who are in a similar position to others with debilitating or terminal diseases. We have been working with the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to deliver a pathway that provides effective adaptations at the outset, when people need them. COSLA and ALACHO continue to work with MND Scotland and others to deliver that

pathway. I am happy to pick that up with the member afterwards.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister must know that one in four wheelchair users says that their home is not suitable for their needs, and that 17,000 of them have unmet housing needs. Many people in my North East Fife constituency are desperate for a home, yet only 1 per cent of the social housing is suitable. With 17 years of a social housing build programme, why are so many homes unsuitable for disabled people?

Paul McLennan: It is very much a partnership approach. I mentioned the local housing strategies, which are produced by the local authorities. I have had discussions with Fife Council and other local authorities; it is about making sure that they are aware of the number of people who are in that position, which Mr Rennie talked about, and what they can do. We talk about adaptation in "Housing for Varying Needs: a design guide", which deals with housing going forward, but it is up to the local housing strategy, which Fife Council would have produced, to identify the numbers involved.

I have raised the matter with Fife Council on a number of occasions, and I am happy to pick it up with Mr Rennie afterwards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 is not lodged.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

7. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to tackle social isolation and loneliness. (S6O-03204)

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): We published our delivery plan for our social isolation and loneliness strategy, "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026", in March 2023. The plan aims to improve understanding of social isolation and loneliness, to reduce the harm that is caused by it and to tackle the public health issue.

The plan highlights the actions that we are taking, including providing funding support of more than £3 million to 53 organisations across Scotland over a three-year period to deliver community-led activity that responds to local needs.

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the social isolation and loneliness advisory group to help us to deliver the plan and to collaborate on ways to tackle social isolation and loneliness for those most impacted.

Russell Findlay: The *Sunday Post* and Age Scotland have launched the big brow community,

which is a campaign to reduce loneliness and isolation among older people by 2030. It is backed by the “Cartoon Cavalcade” legend Glen Michael, who is 98 years old—most people in here, apart from Meghan Gallacher, will know who I am talking about. Today, to use some good old-fashioned newspaper language, I can sensationally reveal that the campaign is now being backed by none other than Oor Wullie and that Scotland’s naughtiest schoolboy is to break the habit of a lifetime by helping the old folk of Auchenshuggle, starting this Sunday—so members should get their *Sunday Post*. Does the Scottish Government join Glen Michael, me and Oor Wullie in supporting this excellent campaign?

Emma Roddick: I am not sure how old the member thinks I am. Although I do not understand all his references, I certainly understand the one to the big brow community campaign. We discussed it at the most recent meeting of the social isolation and loneliness advisory group. I very much welcome the support for the campaign to tackle social isolation and loneliness, and I look forward to working with everybody involved to make sure that we are all on the same page and doing all that we can.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am somebody who can remember Glen Michael.

Will the minister elaborate on what impact the £3.2 million social isolation and loneliness fund is expected to have on the wellbeing of the groups and individuals across Scotland who are most in need of support?

Emma Roddick: I have managed to meet quite a few of the organisations in receipt of money from the fund so far. Even on those brief visits, I have been able to appreciate the impact that the fund is having on groups such as older people, younger people, those with mental health difficulties and disabled people.

The fund’s intention is to support organisations to create opportunities for people to connect, and we know from evaluation of the first year of activity that many organisations have reported increased social connections and the associated improvement in the mental wellbeing of participants. One organisation reported that 100 per cent of participants have improved their confidence in going out and being socially active simply by engaging with the project. The evaluation also told us that some organisations have improved partnership working in order to increase the activities on offer to communities.

The total number of beneficiaries predicted to benefit from funded activities is about 20,000 over the duration of the fund. We will continue to monitor progress with the fund.

Housing

8. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to comments made by the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland, which described Scotland as being “in the midst of a housing emergency”. (S6O-03205)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I spoke to CHIS at its conference last week on the day that it made that announcement. We recognise the housing challenges that are being experienced across the United Kingdom, and we are determined to address the current levels of homelessness, in part through the supply of affordable social housing.

However, the UK Government failed to inflation proof its capital budget, which has resulted in nearly a 10 per cent real-terms cut in our capital funding. The financial transactions budget has also been cut by 62 per cent. That is on top of Brexit and UK Government financial mismanagement that has caused inflationary pressures and supply and labour shortages in the construction industry.

As I have mentioned previously, we are working with the financial community in Scotland and elsewhere to boost private sector investment and deliver more homes.

Jamie Greene: After 17 years in government, what a shameful response that is. In Scotland, 10,000 children are living in temporary accommodation and 130,000 households are waiting for social housing, and that response from the minister is the best that we get from the Government.

Shelter Scotland accused this Government—not any other Government—of “gaslighting” the people of Scotland on the housing emergency. Three councils have declared a housing emergency, and CHIS is the latest in a long line of organisations to declare such an emergency. Everyone knows that it is an emergency, except this Government.

Shelter has specifically called on the First Minister to make an urgent statement to the Parliament on Scotland’s housing emergency before the Easter recess. Will he do that? If he will not, why not?

Paul McLennan: I cannot comment for the First Minister, but I will take up some of the member’s points. If he looks at the statement that Shelter released about the UK Government, he will see that it was as damning as the statement about the Scottish Government.

If we are going to quote independent analysis, we should look at the Crisis homelessness monitor—one of the key pieces of work to have come out in the past few months—which is based

on independent research at Heriot-Watt University. One of the two things that it said have had the biggest impact on reducing homelessness is local housing allowance, which has been frozen by the UK Government for a number of years and for which there is a big demand. That presents a challenge for the Labour Party, too; once—or if—it comes to power in the UK, will it reinstate that? The second most important issue is universal credit rates. Again, those decisions have been made by the UK Government.

I go back to the point about the 10 per cent cut to our capital budget. As we are talking about decisions, our capital budget was cut by 10 per cent in order to pay for national insurance cuts for the most wealthy in society.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that, despite UK Government cuts to capital funding, Scotland's affordable housing supply programme remains the most ambitious and successful such programme in the UK?

Paul McLennan: Our affordable housing supply programme is, indeed, the most ambitious such programme in the UK. We remain focused on delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, despite the UK Government's unprecedented cuts to our capital funding.

Since 2007, Scotland has led the way in housing, having delivered more than 40 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than England and 70 per cent more than Wales. From 23 March 2022 to the end of September 2023, 15,765 homes were delivered towards the affordable homes target of 110,000, and 12,188 of the homes that have been delivered are for social rent.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Does the minister accept that, in the period since the Government came to office in 2007, more social housing properties have been constructed each year, on average, than was the case for the eight years before the Government came to office?

All of us want more affordable housing developments to be undertaken. However, if the Scottish Government budget was not subjected to the callous cuts in capital expenditure that we have experienced from the Conservative Government perpetually and consistently, would that not help to enable the Scottish Government to fulfil its objectives and to address the legitimate concerns that have been raised by the housing sector?

Paul McLennan: I concur with the member's points. The Scottish Government has consistently delivered more homes per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom. I mentioned

the impact of the 10 per cent cut to our capital budget, and the 62 per cent cut to our financial transactions budget has made the situation extremely difficult for us. It comes back to the point about decision making, because the 10 per cent cut in our capital budget paid for national insurance cuts for the most wealthy in society.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time.

Addressing Child Poverty Through Parental Employment

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12468, in the name of Collette Stevenson, on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, on addressing child poverty through parental employment. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Bob Doris to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

14:51

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): More astute members will have noticed that I am not Collette Stevenson. Collette sends her apologies; she wishes that she could lead the debate, but I am afraid that members will have to put up with me instead.

I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on its inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. A central aim of the Scottish Government's best start, bright futures delivery plan is to support up to 12,000 parents to access and sustain employment and up to 3,000 in-work parents to increase their earnings by 2026. The overall objective of our inquiry is to ensure delivery of that ambition in that timescale. The committee does not, however, underestimate the task at hand, as we will hear today.

Increasing parental employment and securing better-paid employment is a multifaceted issue that intersects with many policy areas across different portfolios and requires a partnership approach to delivery. Those complexities can be illustrated through the myriad of employability programmes, skills, training and education qualifications that are being delivered to better equip the workforce for a variety of employment sectors.

Our inquiry sought to bring together all those strands with the fundamental support that is needed to help parents, particularly those on low incomes, to transition into and to sustain employment. For example, the committee highlighted the need for changes to social security rules to support parents who are undertaking education, who can be financially penalised by the system when trying to improve their work opportunities, and it set out that parents who want to work are being prevented from accessing work because of inaccessible and unaffordable childcare or transport.

We wanted parents to help to shape our inquiry, so we took our inquiry first to Rutherglen. We heard loud and clear that parents want good-quality flexible work as a route out of poverty. To further inform our understanding of the issues that are of most concern, we also travelled to the Western Isles and North Ayrshire to pick up on the rural aspects of entrenched unemployment. In Uist, parents told the committee that there are jobs available and that nobody needs to be unemployed, but that there are barriers to taking those jobs in the first place, particularly in relation to childcare, transport and housing. In Irvine, a mother of seven who was supported by an employability service to develop skills and get back into work said:

"doing this is frightening but with support it's manageable".

We heard that no single piece of the puzzle can be prioritised over another—that is the challenge—and that it all needs to be given sufficient focus in order to deliver for parents. Dumfries and Galloway Council described the complexities of the puzzle. It said:

"improved access to transport without access to childcare will not work, similarly increasing higher paid roles without support for upskilling and reskilling will still exclude some people from opportunities. The approach must be considered as a whole system approach not separate policies or interventions."

I put on record the committee's thanks to those individuals who shared their experiences with us and the organisations that provided their knowledge of supporting parents to navigate the barriers to employment.

Given the enormosity of the task and the short time that is available to accomplish it, the committee welcomes the creation of the tackling child poverty programme board and the cross-portfolio ministerial oversight group on child poverty. Both of those will be crucial, and we expect their oversight to provide a valuable accountability mechanism. The committee will monitor whether that ensures the effectiveness of cross-portfolio co-operation at the national level and, crucially, whether it drives forward partnership delivery at a local level to achieve increased parental employment.

The Scottish Government has already made substantial progress in its fight against child poverty. It has put money into the pockets of families who are desperately trying to provide for their children. Nonetheless, the clock is still ticking. Further progress needs to be made on the delivery plan by the end of this session. More needs to be done, and at pace, so that parents who want to work can access fair and family-friendly employment and give their children the best possible life chances. I do not doubt the scale of

that challenge. That includes affordable transport in rural and urban areas to support the types of trips that are regularly made by parents. It also includes appropriate education provision to widen access to parents.

However, the overarching infrastructure barrier that is raised with us is childcare. Parents attending Cothrom, a community organisation in South Uist, painted a bleak picture of the situation in rural areas. There is only one childminder in Uist. The council provision is over capacity and offers only set hours. One parent told members that she was offered a three-hour nursery care placement a one-hour drive away—of no use to her. Another struggled because there was no after-school care at all available in Benbecula.

The Poverty Alliance reinforced to the committee:

“Childcare is critical to enabling parents to enter and progress within paid employment. This is particularly true for mothers and single parents, over 90% of whom are women.”

The provision of affordable and flexible childcare often determines whether women have a job, what hours they can work and what their earnings will be. The high cost of childcare means that paid work is simply unviable for many parents, particularly single mothers. Childcare provision should be affordable. That should happen in funded places—full or subsidised—at nurseries, breakfast clubs and after-school clubs. Childcare provision should be flexible to support parents who work irregular work patterns. It should be available in the evenings and at weekends, as well as, crucially, during school holidays.

Childcare provision should be accessible. The lack of specialised childcare for children with additional support needs was of great concern to the committee. Carers Scotland explained that

“nearly a third ... of parents of disabled children are not working, with 40% having been out of work for more than five years.”

The committee welcomes the Government’s recent commitment to increase the availability of funded childcare hours and the investment in early learning and childcare. We also acknowledge the promising initiatives and pilot schemes, such as the development of school-age childcare and increasing the childminding workforce, with a target of another 1,000 childminding workers.

However, many gaps in services remain and will need to be filled if all families in Scotland are to benefit from genuinely accessible, affordable and equitable provision. That is why the committee has recommended that the Scottish Government undertake a detailed assessment of the current childcare workforce availability across the sector. That should include workforce skills in caring for

children with additional support needs and the levels of provision that are required to allow children from different cultural backgrounds to access the service, and in remote and rural areas to facilitate employment for parents who are experiencing multiple inequalities. Prompt action is needed to support the development of a sustainable workforce to provide affordable, flexible and accessible childcare across ages, settings and regions.

The committee acknowledges the immensely challenging economic and governance circumstances that we face in tackling child poverty through increasing parental employment. There have been positive policy choices made by the Government, such as the Scottish child payment. Nevertheless, for the commitments that are set out in the best start, bright futures delivery plan to have a meaningful and collective impact, policies must offer a seamless package of support to families and be executed at an increased pace, with clear delivery and spending plans set against them.

Decisive actions to deliver outcomes are imperative. The Scottish Government must, without delay, “supercharge”—we chose that word—its efforts across policy areas. I appreciate that that is easier said than done, cabinet secretary, but that is the challenge. Only then can the cycle of child poverty be broken and parents provide a truly bright future for their families.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee’s 11th Report, 2023 (Session 6), *Addressing Child Poverty Through Parental Employment* (SP Paper 476).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have some time in hand for interventions.

15:00

The Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work (Gillian Martin): I thank the committee members for leading the inquiry and all those who participated in it, particularly those whom Bob Doris has mentioned around Scotland, both near and far.

I welcome today’s debate on this important issue. Tackling child poverty is a central mission for the Government, and we are committed to doing everything within the scope of our limited powers and resources to meet our statutory child poverty targets. Modelling that was published last month makes clear the continued substantial impact that Scottish Government policies are having on child poverty levels in Scotland. It is estimated that 100,000 children will be kept out of

relative poverty in 2024-25 by our policies, with relative poverty levels 10 percentage points lower than they would otherwise have been. That includes keeping an estimated 60,000 children out of relative poverty through investment in our game-changing—not the Scottish Government’s words, but those used independently by others—Scottish child payment.

Although we are focused on tackling child poverty, we cannot escape the fact that Scotland has been badly let down by the United Kingdom Government, with the spring budget marking another failure to deliver the funding that Scotland needs, following more than a decade of UK Government underinvestment. Despite that significant challenge, the 2024-25 Scottish budget unapologetically directs our resources to those who are in greatest need and commits us to investing in key measures to tackle child poverty now and in the future. It should be noted that a significant amount of our budget is deployed to mitigate the effects of UK welfare policies that, without our interventions, would increase poverty and put up more barriers to work for parents.

Although employment can offer a sustainable route out of poverty for many people, too many families are trapped in in-work poverty and many more are still locked out of the labour market. That is why we are taking action right across Government.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

Does the minister agree that the cost of childcare is also contributing to that? Will she give an update on where the Government is with its expansion of free childcare?

Gillian Martin: I will come on to speak about childcare later in my speech, but I note that Scotland has the best childcare offer. It is about how childcare is deployed at local authority level, because the picture is different depending on where you go in Scotland. My constituency is in Aberdeenshire, and we recently had an announcement from the Tory-led Aberdeenshire Council that it is taking away wraparound care at school level.

We in the Government can say what our high-level policies are and give the funding for councils to commit to them, but councils can make decisions that put up more barriers for parents. I am not just talking about my response to that as a constituency MSP; there is also the response of organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed, and I suggest that Meghan Gallacher has a look at what it said about Conservative-led Aberdeenshire Council and the issues that she has just raised.

We are taking action right across Government with the powers that we have to ensure that, when work is the right choice for parents, they are

supported to get into work that is well paid. We take every step that we can to improve the quality of the jobs that are available.

Our employment stats are quite encouraging at the moment. We now have 79,000 more people in payrolled employment compared with January 2020, and there are 3,400 living-wage-accredited employers in Scotland, with 64,000 workers having had a pay rise as a result of that particular intervention. Access to the right education and training was mentioned by the deputy convener, and tailored and holistic employment support services are essential in helping parents to enter, progress in and sustain work.

In contrast to the UK Government’s conditionality regime, our employability services are voluntary. That means that people are not mandated to access support, are not penalised if they do not take up an offer of support and are not pushed into poor-quality work as quickly as possible simply to meet short-term job start targets, which can increase in-work poverty.

In the coming year, we will invest up to £90 million in devolved employability services, and we will continue to focus on ensuring that specific support that is aimed at increasing parental income from employment is in place up and down the country. To ensure that services continue to develop and strengthen, the Scottish budget sets out our commitment to providing multiyear funding in the future that will provide much-needed certainty to the sector and for the people who access our services. That has been asked for, and the Deputy First Minister has committed to doing it.

To better support students, building on our continued commitment to free tuition, we will increase the higher education student support package by £2,400 in 2024-25. In addition, our programme for government sets out our commitment to outlining plans for implementing reform of our education and skills bodies, which will involve putting the voices of children, young people and adult learners at their core. We will continue to focus on improving help and support to unlock the labour market for more parents and to increase the earnings of those who are already in work.

I point members to a couple of reports that have come out recently. In its report, “Working wonders: The role of employability in tackling poverty”, which was published this morning, the Institute for Public Policy Research recommends strongly that employment law and everything that is associated with employability should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament so that we can make even more key interventions in that area. That follows on from a report by the Jimmy Reid Foundation that was published in February that said exactly

the same thing. If we had those levers, we could do an awful lot more, especially around fair work.

We know that fair and flexible employment can make a real difference. Even though powers over employment remain reserved to the UK Government, we will continue to drive meaningful change through our fair work policy and engagement with businesses.

In 2015, the Scottish Government became the first Government in the UK to become an accredited living wage employer, and, since 2019, our fair work principles have been applied to more than £4 billion of public funds. We have made it a requirement for recipients of public sector grants awarded on or after 1 July 2023 to pay at least the real living wage and to provide appropriate and effective channels for workers' voices. That comes back to the idea that it is not just a case of getting people into work, but of getting people into well-paid and living wage employment. In addition, the new deal for business group is developing a high-quality functioning relationship between Government and business, in recognition of the fact that that is key to building an economy that is fair, green and growing.

The impact of our actions is clear. We remain the best performing of all four UK countries, with the highest proportion of employees who are paid the real living wage or more. The gender pay gap for all employees is lower in Scotland than it is for the rest of the UK as a whole.

Although the picture is positive, we are not complacent. I am determined to work with partners to see how we can get real movement particularly on closing the disability employment gap, because everyone should have the right to fair work. Importantly—Bob Doris mentioned this—without access to high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare and transport, employment will remain out of reach for many parents. Scotland remains the only part of the UK—

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Gillian Martin: Yes, I will.

John Swinney: The minister has just made reference to the importance of childcare and transport issues being addressed. Does she accept—and is it the Government's position—that integrated and cohesive support needs to be available to individuals to enable them to access employment? It is not simply a case of solving one issue, such as childcare, or another issue, such as transport. We need to put together combined solutions that address the circumstances of individuals and enable them to gain access to employment.

Gillian Martin: I absolutely agree with Mr Swinney on that point. As a rural MSP, he will know that that is a particular challenge in rural settings. Bob Doris mentioned an offer of childcare that was made to someone in Uist that would have required them to travel for an hour. All those things must be integrated. If we solve one problem without solving the others, we will not address the barriers that are there for parents, especially in rural areas.

Scotland is the only part of the UK that offers 1,140 hours a year of early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds, regardless of their parents' working status. Our offer would cost families around £5,000 per eligible child if they were to pay for it themselves. I certainly remember what that was like for my two children.

In 2024-25, we will continue to invest around £1 billion in high-quality funded early learning and childcare, and we will continue to expand access to funded school-age childcare for families who need it.

We cannot overestimate how crucial childcare expansion is as a lever for tackling barriers to employment and economic activity and, as a consequence, for reducing child poverty. However, as I said in response to Meghan Gallacher's intervention, it is crucial that that is done at the local level, in the way that John Swinney has suggested. It should be deployed by councils in a way that works for parents.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the minister give way on that point?

Gillian Martin: I will just get to the end of my point.

It should not be a one-size-fits-all situation in which, if someone cannot access childcare, they have to pay for it themselves. It has to involve working with parents and their particular circumstances.

Meghan Gallacher: Through its childcare expansion programme, the Government has created a system in which, when it comes to setting the rates, councils are both banker and competitor. Private, voluntary and independent nurseries are closing their doors. How on earth can the minister talk about the expansion of childcare and the importance of childcare when the Government does not have the right policy for it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, when responding, please also bring your remarks to a close.

Gillian Martin: I will have to wind up, but I ask Meghan Gallacher to look at how the childcare offer down in England works in comparison with

the Scottish offer, which has been very successful. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Balfour!

Gillian Martin: On tackling travel, I mention the investment of £370 million to provide free bus travel for more than 2 million people. It is about transport services as well. Our fair fares review will ensure that our public transport system is accessible, available and affordable for people across Scotland and that it will help to connect parents to the opportunities and essential services that are needed.

I will close, Presiding Officer. I welcome today's debate and members' reflections on how we can further strengthen our approach within the limits of our powers and resources. Maybe it would be nice to get closer to a consensus on the devolution of the additional powers that would allow us to unlock the capacity to do so much more.

15:12

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the organisations that have provided helpful briefings ahead of today's debate, and I thank our committee clerks for the amount of work that they did on what has been quite a long committee inquiry. I was keen for the Social Justice and Social Security Committee to undertake the inquiry, and I very much welcome the evidence that has been given on what needs to improve to help parents to get back into employment and how we can work collectively to tackle child poverty. The two visits that I undertook—in Glasgow and in the Western Isles—provided, at the heart, that lived-experience evidence, which the committee report has managed to capture.

The report makes a number of key asks of the Scottish Government, and we Conservatives welcome those. The committee has called on the Scottish Government to share

“the annual and quarterly progress reports produced by the Tackling Child Poverty Programme Board”

and I believe that those reports, as well as better data on outcomes, are needed in order to understand how policies impact and what is needed to address child poverty across Scotland. As we heard from the committee's deputy convener, it has also called for greater

“scrutiny of the effectiveness of cross-portfolio cooperation on tackling child poverty”

in Scotland.

However, as we will hear today, what is perhaps the biggest challenge remains, which is the issue of childcare not being available. All MSPs will know that acutely. Bob Doris outlined the seamless package of support that parents are

looking for. I am sure that, as a former education secretary, the cabinet secretary will be acutely aware of that.

I will not rehearse the problems that have been widely reported—and documented by Meghan Gallacher—in relation to the limited flexibility that the 1,140 hours childcare policy currently offers to parents who seek work or opportunities for study. As the Poverty Alliance briefing states, there is a real need now for

“greater flexibility”

at the heart of the delivery of 1,140 hours,

“to ensure the policy meets the stated aims, with a focus on increased flexibility”

for the provision of childcare for families.

Councils across the country face the difficult task of delivering that, and I have a huge amount of sympathy for Aberdeenshire Council in the difficult decisions that it has had to take. Per head of population, it is the council that is second-lowest funded by the Scottish National Party-Green Government—the lowest being my own, the City of Edinburgh Council.

The minister has to recognise that there is a critical need for more childcare provision outwith the times that it is traditionally provided. That is at the heart of what the report is calling for.

John Swinney: I am interested in the substance of the point that Mr Briggs and Meghan Gallacher are advancing in the debate. They are, in essence, saying that the design of the delivery of 1,140 hours around the country is inflexible because of the provision that is made on the ground.

I represent an area that, until 2022, had a Conservative-led council. That Conservative-led council introduced the childcare arrangements that are in place, which I am sure that Roz McCall is disassociating herself from, despite the fact that she was part of the administration that set them up.

Does Miles Briggs not accept that the flexibility that he seeks is contained in the powers of local authorities to design the childcare provision in their locality and that, if they choose to design it in the fashion in which it has been designed in my locality, where there is very little provision outwith the local authority, it is councils that take those decisions? Would the Conservatives take that power away from councils to effect the solution that Meghan Gallacher has her head in her hands about just now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you your time back, Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs: The point that the former education secretary and Deputy First Minister also needs to understand is that the Scottish Government has created this model in which Scottish Government-funded early years units and nurseries are providing free hours for pre-school, which has had an impact on where people are working in the sector. We know that the number of individual childminders in Scotland, for example, has fallen considerably. Having the flexibility to decide, as a parent, what childcare you want has been impacted. I do not think that the Scottish Government understands—

John Swinney: Will Miles Briggs give way?

Miles Briggs: I do not think that I will be able to get six minutes back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is time in hand if the member wishes to take an intervention.

Miles Briggs: I am happy to.

John Swinney: I am interested in advancing the debate, because we have to flush out the rhetoric from the Conservatives on this question.

Mr Briggs is, I think, arguing for taking away from local authorities the power to design the 1,140 hours at local level. Roz McCall and Meghan Gallacher are shaking their heads and gesticulating, as they have done throughout the debate. Is that the Conservative position? I cannot see how they can effect the propositions that they are putting to Parliament, and criticising the Government over, without being open about that very point.

Miles Briggs: The key thing is choice.

Meghan Gallacher: Will Miles Briggs give way?

Miles Briggs: I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Meghan Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: The problem is that the legislation that was created in this Parliament by this SNP Scottish Government is not watertight. There are 32 councils doing 32 different things across all local authorities. *[Interruption.]* We have a system in which councils are the competitor and the banker. The buck stops with the SNP and its legislation, which is not watertight.

Miles Briggs: I agree with Meghan Gallacher on that point.

That is at the heart of what the report captured. The committee has asked the Scottish Government to reassess the scope and to accelerate its work in childcare provision. It has noted that the exact timings, hours of provision, eligibility and income thresholds for child provision have still not been announced by Scottish

Government ministers. We do not, in fact, know what the Scottish Government is expecting councils to achieve.

The committee has also called on the Government to provide detailed spending plans in relation to childcare provisions. The latest programme for government does not set out any new funding that will be available to meet the new childcare commitments. The committee—cross-party, I should say—has therefore called on ministers to set out detailed spending plans that show what they aim to achieve and where spending will be provided for that.

The committee has also called on ministers to undertake an

“assessment of the current childcare workforce availability across the sector”,

which should include

“skills for children with additional support needs, and the levels of provision required to allow children from different cultural backgrounds to access the services, as well as the provision needed in remote and rural areas for parents to start or return to work.”

When we were in the Western Isles, we saw how different models are being provided by employers, the third sector and councils. That flexibility for parents in rural and remote areas, who sometimes have two or three jobs, needs to be considered. It is in relation to that flexibility that I do not think that the Government has got this policy right, to return to that point. I hope that this debate can be an opportunity for it to pause and think about that.

Perhaps most pressing, though, is the need for the Scottish Government to do more for parents who are returning to education. The committee called on the Scottish Government to

“evaluate successful initiatives”

and

“scale up work and ensure there is national provision for adults seeking to return to education.”

It also recommended that the Government provide “part-time courses with flexibility built in”.

We heard important evidence about that when we were in Glasgow and met parents who were returning to college.

It is also important to consider the briefing that Inclusion Scotland provided to members ahead of the debate.

Gillian Martin: Will Miles Briggs give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: To be fair, the member has been very generous already.

Miles Briggs: The Deputy Presiding Officer has been most courteous on the matter of time.

Inclusion Scotland's briefing states that the proposed changes would disproportionately affect households in receipt of benefits. There have been a number of really positive suggestions on further increasing the funded childcare entitlement to the equivalent of 50 hours a week for low-income families. There has also been significant input from lone-parent families asking about the child payment. There has been investment in targeted employability support to deliver fair work and to consider the particular needs of priority family groups. All that was at the heart of the evidence that we took. We also need to see delivery of employability commitments and the best start, bright futures policy.

John Swinney touched on several points in his argument for a holistic approach to helping families. That is why I hope that he will join Scottish Conservatives in championing a policy that we want to see piloted, which is on family hubs that would aim to support the integration of health, social care and education, providing a one-stop shop for families who seek support. We could expand on that at a further date, but I think that such a measure could help families.

There is cross-party consensus that the best way to tackle child poverty is to ensure that parents and guardians are able to access employment opportunities and fair work. However, the report makes it clear that parents across Scotland still face significant barriers to employment and training opportunities. That is why I hope that its contents will lead to Scottish National Party and Green ministers focusing again on establishing innovative policies and on the committee's suggestions for expanding childcare provision and flexibility and creating additional support schemes for parents who seek to re-enter the workplace or gain educational opportunities.

The committee's report is a useful one. Looking beyond the ministers' comments that we have heard in the debate, I hope that they will genuinely consider acting on the report's recommendations.

15:22

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I welcome the chance to highlight the report to Parliament and to highlight the important role that improved parental employability has to play in our fight against child poverty.

Tackling poverty, and in particular child poverty, is a mission that is broadly shared across the Parliament. Indeed, in many instances we have worked across the chamber to act in that area, not least by setting ambitious targets for the reduction of child poverty by 2030 and on the introduction of the Scottish child payment, which Labour had long

called for and backed. It is no secret—we have already heard it said—that our actions need to go further and faster if we are to tackle child poverty and meet those ambitious 2030 targets. We need to recognise that there are concerns that we might fall short of those targets and of the interim targets that the Government has set.

Supporting parental employment as a mechanism to tackle poverty, which the report highlights, is just one of the areas in which we can go further and faster. I became a member of the Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee halfway through the inquiry.

John Swinney: Does Mr O'Kane believe that the Scottish Government would be able to go further and faster on tackling child poverty—its efforts on which I whole-heartedly endorse—if it had followed the Scottish Labour Party's tax advice in the recent budget debate, which would have resulted in there being a reduction of about £500 million in the resources available to the Government?

Paul O'Kane: The arguments on the budget and on the required growth of the economy were well made. I did not detect a focus on economic growth or employability in the Scottish Government's budget, nor did I detect one on improving access to work for people across Scotland, including parents, especially those of young children. We could have another debate on the council tax freeze, which has attracted a degree of commentary from across the country on what could have been paid for instead of that intervention, which was not welcomed across the piece.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Paul O'Kane: If the cabinet secretary would let me make just a little progress, I will come back to her.

I joined the Social Justice and Social Security Committee as it was progressing through its inquiry, and I was not able to go on the committee visits, but I heard evidence from representatives of a number of leading organisations, who spoke about the work that needs to be done to support people back into work, in order to develop a strong economy. A lot of concern was raised about budgetary decisions that have been made, and we have to consider the promised £53 million in funding for employability schemes and the complete scrapping of the parental transition fund. That was seriously concerning, and it was raised by a number of the organisations that gave evidence during the inquiry.

We should also look to the research by One Parent Families Scotland, which has put on record

the difficulties that families have experience in not being able to afford essentials.

IPPR spoke about

“a massive chasm between the overall number of people being reached by current employability programmes and those who are supported into work.”—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 15 June 2023; c 25.]

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has highlighted that one in 10 Scots is in persistent low pay. As we know, women are particularly impacted by that, as they are more likely to be single parents.

Gillian Martin: I have heard many times from Labour members over the years that I have been here that they support the devolution of employment law to the Scottish Parliament. Is that the current position?

Paul O’Kane: The minister knows full well that we had a number of debates in this place prior to Christmas on the devolution of employment law, and we have stated clearly that we need to have a UK floor for the standards that are expected. Our new deal for working people, which I am about to come on to talk about, has to represent the floor in terms of what we will deliver for people across the UK, with a view to the second phase, which will be on exploring what we can devolve further. We need to ensure that the standards are embedded across the UK.

What are those standards? They are a real living wage paid to workers, rights from day 1, the end of zero-hours contracts and the end of fire and rehire. Those should be the standards; that should be the floor—and that is supported by both the Trades Union Congress and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. That new deal for working people could represent a huge moment under a Labour Government, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, putting money back into the pockets of working people and supporting people in work. The point that I was making prior to the minister’s intervention was about that persistent low pay, which impacts on families across Scotland and hinders people from accessing all the support that they need in order to afford the essentials.

I will refer to some of the excellent work that has been done across Scotland, which I think would attract a degree of consensus in the chamber on where we can learn and do more. Fife Gingerbread is an excellent organisation, from which we heard during our inquiry. It has excellent advice and support services for lone parents and families in need. It co-ordinates with local employers to parent proof vacancies, establishing an action plan to help parents through training, education and going into employment, backed up by financial advice and all the holistic services that

we would expect to be offered in supporting people on their journey back into work. I met representatives of Fife Gingerbread, and they commented to me that their whole approach is not just about the individual and the person seeking work; it has to be about the employer and the flexibility that we can expect from employers—which is not always forthcoming. I encourage the Government to continue to work in that space, to meet Fife Gingerbread again and to do further work.

Gillian Martin: Will Paul O’Kane give way?

Paul O’Kane: If the minister is going to support that, I will certainly give way to her.

Gillian Martin: Does Paul O’Kane not admit that, when it comes to compelling employers to do anything around workplace conditions, employment law needs to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

Paul O’Kane: As I have said already, I think that we need a floor of rights for workers and expectations on employers, and I think that we can do that at UK level with our new deal for working people. I am being expected to take a lecture on employment rights from a Scottish Government that does not pay £15 an hour to social care workers, despite the demands of the trade unions, that sold off £700 million of renewables licences without a single condition for workers and that itself used zero-hours contracts to deliver leaflets for the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election, so I do not think I will take any further lectures on employment rights from the Government.

Having been generous with interventions and having relied on your generosity, Deputy Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time. I will conclude by saying that Scottish Labour remains committed to working with whoever is willing to drive forward a mission to tackle child poverty. We welcome the report and what it has done to highlight parental employment issues. We hope that we can do more to tackle childcare and transport issues, for example. However, fundamentally, we know that we must have a floor of rights across the UK and that that can come only with a Labour Government.

15:30

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am pleased about this debate, because I was—as is my wont—gently critical of the Government in a debate in recent weeks about the child payment. It seemed that the Government regarded the payment of the child payment as the success, rather than getting more families and parents back into work and making work pay. I am pleased to see that there is a focus on employability in a way that John Swinney has rightly highlighted. It is not

about one single thing; a package of measures needs to be put in place. I am therefore pleased that this debate is happening.

There has been a focus on childcare. I do not quite agree with Meghan Gallacher's analysis of the problem, but there certainly is a problem, and that problem was built in from the beginning, when the childcare arrangements were put in place. There was an agreement between the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that there would be a pay differential between council workers in nurseries and workers in the PVI sector. That was built in from the start.

I understand why that was done—the sector has evolved in that way. That was fine when there was a much bigger private contribution to childcare but, as the state provision has increased, the ability for cross-subsidy has been limited. Therefore, we have ended up with the PVI sector really under the cosh. The recent review of the rates has not really helped; I think that it has maintained the gap. The result is that we are losing experienced staff from the PVI sector to council nurseries. Closing that gap will not be easy and it will take years, but it needs to be closed if we want to maintain the flexibility that is provided by—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: Let me finish my point.

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: Let me finish this point. I know—I am keen.

The PVI sector offers flexibility and the extra capacity that we require, but it is also important that it provides quality. I am really worried about that point. If experienced personnel leave the PVI sector—not always to council nurseries; they sometimes leave for supermarkets, in which they will be paid more—that will result in a loss of quality in the sector. We desperately need that quality.

I will take the cabinet secretary's question first.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to Willie Rennie for the opportunity to point out that 93 per cent of households that receive early learning and childcare were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with its overall quality. I hope that he takes that reassurance on board.

Will Willie Rennie also welcome the £16 million-worth of funding to uplift pay in the private, voluntary and independent sector, which the First Minister announced very recently?

Willie Rennie: I accept that many parents are satisfied just now. The important point is that I am predicting a problem for the future, and I hope that the cabinet secretary takes what I say in that light.

The PVI sector is sending out clear warning signals that it is already losing staff. Some in the sector are reducing their capacity. We cannot do with that. We need more flexibility, because councils often cannot provide the flexibility that the PVI sector provides.

I hope that the cabinet secretary will speak to her colleagues to try to close that gap. That is not necessarily anything to do with how things are structured; it is to do with the funding rates that are available. The £12 an hour helps, but it does not close the gap. The starting salary in council nurseries in Stirling, for example, is £15 or £16 an hour, whereas it is £12 an hour in private nurseries just down the road. I know where I would go and work. We need to have good people in the PVI sector for it to thrive.

John Swinney: I agree with a lot of Mr Rennie's analysis. The point that I have been trying to advance with the Conservatives is that, essentially, local authorities had the ability to design the arrangements at the local level. Many have chosen to expand the capacity that is under their stewardship. There is a difficult issue there that Parliament has to confront. It is not just about pointing the finger at the Government; we have to engage local authorities about the design of the system. That cannot be ignored in the way that the Conservatives have done today.

Willie Rennie: It is about both. There was an agreement at the beginning of the process between COSLA and the Government that the pay differential would be built into the system, so that council workers would get national terms and conditions and those in the PVI sector would get the living wage. That was built in from the start, but I completely accept Mr Swinney's point that it has been built into the way that councils have set up the service. That will take some time to fix, but it must be fixed or we will see a depreciation of the PVI sector, which I do not think that any of us wants to see.

I have another point about early learning and childcare, which is about the take-up of places for two-year-olds. I was a strong advocate for that and remember encouraging Alex Salmond almost weekly to adopt the policy. I was really concerned to hear recently that, despite the fact that we have an agreement about access to information from the Department for Work and Pensions, the take-up for two-year-olds has dropped.

That is exactly the group of people who we are talking about. Why has that figure gone down when we know where those people are? I appreciate that some councils are on top of that and that there is a big variation between local authorities, but the fact that the number has gone down should surely be deeply alarming to us,

especially when those are exactly the people who we want to get back into work.

Two after-school clubs in my area have closed recently. That is partly to do with the job market and because they cannot get people to work there. In rural areas, there are sometimes not sufficient numbers of parents. However, because of their financial constraints, councils are also pulling out of providing support in some areas. I do not know what is happening in Aberdeenshire or what involvement councillors have had in that, but there is a problem with after-school clubs across the country, and they are essential to the flexible offer that we desperately need.

Although England seem to have cocked it up, the fact that—*[Interruption.]* Okay, I will withdraw that. I thought that it was quite mild. My mother will be back on the phone again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, your mother might still have concerns, further to those of last week.

Willie Rennie: I will withdraw that offensive remark.

There have been difficulties in England with the roll-out of ELC provision for working parents of one and two-year-olds, but they at least have an ambition to do more than the pilot schemes that we have here. I hope that the Scottish Government will be able to quickly roll out the programme. A lot of parents in my constituency have been inquiring why the provision that is available in England is not available in Scotland, and I have to tell them that those are different systems. Nevertheless, those parents are looking for enhanced provision.

I do not know how much more time I have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you until just after eight minutes.

Willie Rennie: I learned something interesting from Inclusion Scotland about work programmes for disabled people. The assessment was that the pathways to work scheme under the Labour Government, the work programme under the coalition and Conservative Governments and the fair start Scotland programme were all pretty ineffective, despite their different designs. Inclusion Scotland found that the best programmes, such as the internship programme from the Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living, were those that were driven by disabled people's organisations. There may be a lesson to learn about drawing on the experience of on-the-ground organisations and trusted individuals to make provision available.

That also applies to colleges. We need colleges, because they give easy access to education, sometimes offering microcredentials and short

courses so that people who have been out of the workplace for some time can easily get new opportunities.

I will finish with one more thing: bus services. I know that, in John Swinney's area, Stagecoach has stripped back an awful lot of its service. Families in small villages and rural communities desperately need good, regular and reliable bus services if they are to get to work.

That takes me back to my first point: there is no single answer; we need a comprehensive suite of measures to get people back to work.

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

15:39

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I thank the committee clerks for their assistance with the production of our report. We received helpful evidence from a range of expert witnesses and people with lived experience, who provided a considerable amount of information that was extremely helpful in reaching our conclusions.

Tackling child poverty, especially without the full powers to do so, is complex but essential. That is why it is a national mission for the Scottish Government and one that can be achieved only if we tackle all the drivers of poverty. Every sector and Government must be up for that mission. Currently, too many families are locked in to in-work poverty and are unable to progress in the labour market, while others are unable to access the labour market at all due to structural barriers. The committee agrees that we need to ensure that there is good-quality flexible work as a route out of poverty, while targeting support for those who are unable to work.

The Scottish Government's "Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026" aims to support up to 12,000 parents to access and sustain employment and up to 3,000 in-work parents to increase their earnings. To do that, the Scottish Government proposes investments in employability support, improvements in connectivity and childcare, the promotion of fair work and investment into local and regional economies. To fully achieve that, the committee agrees that the Government must supercharge its efforts and take decisive action now.

The Scottish Government aims to make employability services contribute to reducing poverty and inequality and transform the economy. Alongside COSLA, it is jointly exploring opportunities to scale up employability support for

parents. Of course, employability services need resources to deliver interventions throughout people's journeys, so we need to know how those services will be scaled up, particularly after the funding for the support that is offered by fair start Scotland ends in April.

There are many recommendations in the committee's report and I cannot cover them all in the time that I have available, so I will highlight a further three issues. Not being able to access childcare is a common barrier to employment, which mostly affects women. There is also a particular issue with accessing childcare for children who have additional support needs. Children's Hospices Across Scotland—CHAS—gave the following example to the committee:

"Just the other day, I was talking to a parent who had in place a very significant package of support but was simply unable to recruit the staff that she needed to support the child, so she is giving up work in order to be the sole carer for her child."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 8 June 2023; c 15.]

That is why, as a committee, we want to see a detailed assessment of the availability of the current childcare workforce across the sector, including those with skills for children who have additional support needs.

The social security system acting as a barrier to getting into or staying in employment is another significant issue. The universal credit conditionality regime does nothing to support people into work and often causes misery and hardship instead. Marion Davis of One Parent Families Scotland, when illustrating the significant impact on lone parents, told us:

"we end up having to take them to food banks because they have had their benefits cut. That has a huge impact on employability and adds to the crisis that families face, which prevents them from moving on and achieving what they want to achieve."

Philip Whyte of the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland, in evidence to us regarding conditionality, said:

"we have collected a lot of UK-wide evidence ... that suggests that the regime is still incredibly punitive rather than supportive. That ratchets up underemployment, because people are quite often directed to, and take, low-quality jobs."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 15 June 2023; c 37.]

It is clear that that approach does not set work on a strong track to help to reduce poverty. Instead, work must pay, and it must be flexible. Providing jobs that pay a fair wage and are family friendly, with flexibility in order to meet parents' needs, is central to tackling child poverty through employment.

In that area, we are also hindered by our lack of control over employment law. Encouragement can

only secure so much. That is why, on behalf of the STUC, Andrea Bradley told us:

"From an STUC point of view, we want to see Scotland in control of the levers that will have the greatest impact on the pay, conditions and working lives of people in Scotland. For that reason, we want to see the devolution of employment law to Scotland."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 22 June 2023; c 32.]

Until we secure the necessary employment powers, I welcome the approach that has been taken by the fair work first policy. We must use that approach to maximise and secure what working people deserve. To that end, I welcome the fact that we are looking at the procurement and tendering process as a way to secure decent terms and conditions.

The aim of tackling child poverty through parental employment is so important to get right. By helping parents to access secure, stable and flexible employment, we can offer a sustainable route out of poverty for many families. As we know, every child should live happy and healthy lives and be able to reach their full potential. Let us push forward on that and prioritise the policies that really tackle child poverty.

15:44

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I am going to start with an incredibly cheesy line. My mum and dad are my heroes. They taught me so many important life skills when I was growing up, but especially they taught me that hard work pays off. That has always stuck with me. Working hard, getting a job and getting yourself into a position where you are financially secure is what most people want in life.

Becoming a parent in 2022 gave me the most important job that I will ever have. However, with the joy of watching your children grow up comes the realisation that you will need to work to provide for them. Parents right across Scotland understand that. There is no other way.

We are living in a completely different world from what generations before me and others experienced. Traditionally, the mum would stay at home and look after the kids while the dad went out to work, but, with the global cost of living crisis, most parents do not have the option to choose that sort of lifestyle any more. That is why work has become integral to tackling child poverty.

Parents should inspire not just their children but themselves. Getting yourself a good, well-paid job with opportunities is the best way to give your child the best possible start in life. That is the ethos that my parents taught me, and that will be the ethos that I pass on to my daughter should she ever wish to start a family.

There are many areas that we could touch on in this debate, as the topic is so broad and it crosses so many portfolios. Unsurprisingly, however, given the interactions that I have already had, I will focus on childcare. I am passionate about that, not just because I am a new mum who is navigating the childcare sector, but because parents need this Government to give them the tools that they need to succeed. That is why I back the roll-out of expanded free childcare here, in Scotland, and in the rest of the UK. It is staggering how much parents pay for childcare in Scotland. At one point, I was paying well over £500 a month, but my eyes watered when I was told first hand by parents that some have to pay well over £1,000 per child per month. That is a whole whack of a parent's salary gone.

There are then the added costs of gas, electricity, council tax, food shopping, phone and internet bills and all the other cost pressures that an average household faces. It is no wonder that some parents decide not to work or to reduce their hours to balance childcare and family income. Parents have told me that, after their first child, they might not be able to afford a second. With the number of babies that are expected to be born over the next decade in freefall, we need to make it easier for mums and dads to raise a family.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member therefore encourage the UK Government to end the two-child cap, which is a punishment for those on low incomes who have more than two children?

Meghan Gallacher: I was hoping that the debate would not descend into politicking, but we are descending into politicking. It is a shame that the Scottish Government is doing that when we are trying to encourage parents into work so that we can try to eradicate child poverty.

Some members in the chamber this afternoon will tell me that the current childcare expansion is a huge success, that there are no problems and that parents love being able to access 1,140 hours of free childcare. However, Willie Rennie made the important point that, although parents enjoy the childcare affordability just now, there are serious problems coming down the track.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Does the member agree that the system is simply not working for parents who work at weekends or do shift work and need childcare?

Meghan Gallacher: Absolutely. Nurses, doctors and others who work in front-line services are all impacted by that. That is why we need to look at childcare. I want childcare to work in Scotland. I think that everybody in the chamber wants that, but, every time I and others raise the issue, we seem to be shot down as if there are no problems whatsoever.

Nurseries in the private sector are closing their doors because this Government has not supported them under the current policy, and childminders are leaving the sector entirely. That is a shame, because the private sector is the backbone of our childcare sector. As Jeremy Balfour highlighted, it is the private sector that is offering parents choice so that they can get back to work. Without that, more parents will need to reduce their working hours or leave the workforce entirely. That will mean that we go backwards.

There is then the issue of councils. I recently learned that, in my own area, North Lanarkshire Council does not offer funded childcare to parents the day after the child turns three. That goes against the principle of the 1,140 hours. I received a response from the council's education department, which told me that it had had to revert to the statutory guidance because of the legislation to defer entry to primary 1. That highlights the financial issues that our councils are facing just now—they have to go back to statutory policies because the Scottish Government has cut their funding. That is factually true, and the Government cannot continue to bury its head in the sand on the issue.

I do not want childcare expansion to fail. I want it to be a success, and I want it to work for parents and for young people. It is far too important to let it fail. It supports parents to get back into the workforce, and it drives down child poverty. I end with another plea: get the childcare expansion back on track so that we can all, collectively, work together to support parents and their children.

15:50

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate. Like some other members, I joined the committee only as its report was being written, so I am afraid that I did not personally hear any of the evidence that was given.

It seems clear that there is no one magic bullet to overcome child poverty; both the committee and the Government are agreed on that point. Parental employment will not be the only answer if that employment is poorly paid, part time or precarious. For some families and some parents, paid employment will not be part of the answer at all, especially if severe disability and caring responsibilities are in play.

As the Government points out in its response to the committee, there needs to be

“wider action to tackle poverty”,

including

“more affordable homes ... Free School Meals and”

social security. The fact that the social security budget is rising from £5.3 billion to £6.3 billion while many other budgets are rising by very little—if at all—seems, to me, proof that this Government's priorities are in the right place.

As many members have said, affordable and accessible childcare is a critical factor. Some would argue that any such provision should be universal and should not risk the stigma that is involved if some families pay and other families do not. There is also a risk that some parents would not apply for what they are entitled to because of a lack of understandable information or because they are struggling to complete forms and paperwork. However, given the limited resources that we have at our disposal, I think that it is right to target low-income families in the greatest need—as the Government says,

“focusing on those who will benefit most.”

I will make some comments in relation to transport, in particular. That is a problem specifically in rural areas and on islands, where there is often little integration between buses and ferries or with onward trains on the mainland. However, there can be a transport problem in cities, too, for parents who are trying to juggle work, school and childcare. Bus and rail services often go only into the city centre rather than round the city—that is certainly a problem in Glasgow—which means that two or more journeys are required to travel round the city.

The Government's response talks about

“ensuring that everyone has accessible public transport regardless of where they live.”

But, to be frank, I wonder if that is ever really going to be possible. I suspect that some people will always need their own vehicle because of where they live, and we have a responsibility to such families as well. The Government's response also refers to

“The bus provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019”,

which

“empower local authorities ... to respond to their own transport challenges”.

That is fair enough, but empowerment is only one side of the equation. The other side is money, and no amount of empowerment automatically provides the required money. The committee heard about the ready2go scheme in and around Inverurie. Although that scheme seems to have been successful, the costs were too great for it to continue.

Again, on the affordability of transport, I note that the Government says:

“support will be for people accessing employability services, rather than a wider concession for low income parents or other groups.”

Ideally, concessionary travel would be extended to include all modes of transport, as the Poverty Alliance suggests in its briefing. However, as I said on a previous point, I think that it is inevitable, given our current financial position, that support needs to be targeted.

John Swinney: Will Mr Mason give way?

John Mason: Absolutely. Mr Swinney is taking over.

John Swinney: On Mr Mason's point about the expansion of the concessionary travel scheme and the scheme being targeted, does he accept the argument that, as part of an employment or path-to-employment offer, it might be possible to offer concessionary travel support for a limited period, which would then be removed once an individual was in sustainable employment?

John Mason: That would be targeting, indeed. In many ways, I like universal benefits—for example, those of us of a certain age have our bus pass, whatever our income is. However, the member's point is correct—we should target, and there should be imaginative ways of considering the matter.

Another imaginative way is demand-responsive transport. It was mentioned in the report particularly in relation to rural areas, but I think that it can be part of the solution in urban areas, too. In Strathclyde, we have MyBus, which is currently restricted to a very limited group of people aged—I think—over 80, which rules out most working people. At the same time, the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport subsidises a number of routes, such as the 310 route in my area—often, there are only one or two people on that bus. I gather that Transport Scotland is reviewing DRT and digital DRT services, and my instinct is that there is potential for more to happen in that space.

On the theme of transport for low-income families, the committee asked the Government to take into account child poverty and parental employment

“when allocating funding for delivering transport policies”.

In its response, the Government referred to the “national transport strategy”, with mention of the

“concessionary travel schemes ... the on-going fair fares review”

and

“the ScotRail peak fares removal pilot”.

To those, I add something that we looked at on Tuesday evening at the cross-party group on sustainable transport. Although e-bikes are expensive, they are a lot cheaper than cars and

can give someone an increased range for travelling to work or college. France appears to be subsidising e-bikes to a much greater extent than the UK is, and anything that we can do in that respect could be a real boost for working parents as well as offering benefits around traffic congestion and air pollution.

Just yesterday, we had an interesting Scottish Parliament information centre breakfast briefing from The Fair Work Convention, whose definition of fair work is

“work that offers ... effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect.”

In some measures, Scotland compares well with other countries. However, I was struck by the figure, which was shown yesterday, that around 75 per cent of workers in Scotland do not have access to flexible working. That surely must be a challenge if we are trying to get children and their families out of poverty. It was encouraging, however, to hear one academic say that most employers do not set out to be bad employers but that many feel constrained by the whole system—for example, in the care sector.

I also note the point in the briefing from the Scottish Women’s Budget Group that the committee’s report is too “gender neutral” and that there is not enough emphasis on

“the link between child poverty and women’s inequality”,

which is probably fair.

All in all, the subject is wide ranging, and perhaps the committee’s report could not encompass every single angle. However, I think that the inquiry and report have been worth while, and I commend them to Parliament.

15:57

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the Social Justice and Social Security Committee for putting together this timely report. I am not a member of the committee; however, tackling child poverty should be the core task of this and every Parliament, so I hope that today’s debate encourages some tangible steps towards achieving that task, rather than it being just talk. People and children really need some action.

If we want to have a constructive debate in the chamber, we have to understand what the Opposition MSPs have a responsibility to do: we have a responsibility to work together, as my colleague Paul O’Kane outlined. There are points in the report that we agree with, and we feel that the committee has worked really well together. However, we have a responsibility to hold the Government to account on the promises that it has made, and to ask questions about what it might wish to do, or be able to do, to tackle the problem.

Scottish Labour agrees whole-heartedly with the committee that parental employment is a key determinant in ending child poverty. In fact, I would say that it is a primary determinant to which Governments across the UK have paid far too little attention: they often seem to think that poverty is the result of some mysterious trend rather than a logical consequence of their having made it harder and harder for people to secure long-term and sustainable employment.

I make it be clear—I think that I have said this in the chamber previously—that I do not believe that the UK Tory Government policies of the past 14 years have helped at all. I always make that position clear. I also make it clear that my job in Parliament is to hold the Government to account for the actions that it can take.

Parental unemployment, especially for extended periods, is at the heart of increased levels of child poverty. We have agreed on that. That, combined with the increasingly hostile environment that surrounds benefits, means that we end up with a recipe for a desperate problem to which we must seek solutions.

Reduction of child poverty is a goal that is shared across Parliament—I have heard that and I believe it—but we know from the report that the Scottish Government is set to miss its target for child poverty reduction next year. If we want to reach the 2030 target of only 10 per cent of children being in relative poverty, even more work will need to be done. It will need to start now, and it will need to be work on action.

The Government’s poverty statistics show that 24 per cent of all children in Scotland were living in poverty between 2019 and 2022. That means an extra 40,000 children have been added to the ranks of the poor over the past decade. I do not think that the Government wants to end its time in power with that as a headline. I hope that the cabinet secretary will give us some feedback on what modelling the Government has done on the issue as the numbers increase, so that we can secure some good work for the future.

For those reasons, the Government should be taking more proactive measures to achieve its aims by ensuring that it efficiently utilises the powers that Parliament has. What can it do? We do not hear enough from the Government about what actions it can take. It is the job of Opposition members to push the Government. When something has happened, we have to push the Government to say what it will do in response, instead of just talking about the difficult thing that has happened. Sitting on hands and allowing significant levers to remain untouched is not good enough. It does not help the budgets of families who are struggling to get into employment.

Parental employability funds were stripped of more than £20 million in last year's budget, and little has been done to address the shortfall. The Government promised to give support in the form of grants, not loans, so that families would not become trapped in debt. That was an aspect of the parental transition fund, but that fund has fallen by the wayside. I hope that the cabinet secretary will say what the Government thinks it might be able to do in that space to help families.

My party has set out plans to create jobs, grow the economy and tackle poverty. Scottish Labour believes—I believe that the Government also believes—that good-quality employment is a key driver in reducing poverty. We need to do more to achieve that.

We also need to consider affordable public transport, which others have mentioned, viable housing support, action on debt and measures to help families with soaring household bills. Other members have also mentioned education and childcare. It is a massively wide area, so we cannot cover all points in the debate.

We need to understand whether we have done things in a meaningful way and whether there is more that we can do. The report indicates that the Scottish Government could be doing more. Eradicating poverty in this country will come only from delivering secure long-term employment around which parents can build a family. Precarious employment and factors that drive unemployment play into the figures on child poverty, so we must address them.

Let us not suffer another lost generation of children. Let us “supercharge”, as others have said, efforts in this important area. To that end, I plead that the Scottish Government look at the promises that it has made and the reality of where we are. Being the best among other parts of the country is not enough. What actions can the Government take with the devolved powers that it has? I think that families would appreciate answers to that question. If we can get answers to people's questions—or even questions about those questions—the Scottish Labour Party would certainly be happy to work together with the Government on them.

16:04

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): One of the tasks that I performed before I left Government was to chair a group of public service ministers. The group met regularly—certainly, during the pandemic, it met intensively. The group provided ministerial supervision of the creation of the child poverty delivery plan, which is at the heart of today's debate. That work was very rewarding, because it drew together all the various

aspects of the Government's responsibilities in order to focus on the single problem of reducing and eradicating child poverty.

The plan recognised that the solution to the problem of child poverty does not lie in one single intervention, but rests on employment support, the child payment and the provision of a range of other supports in childcare, transport, health and education.

The intervention that I made on the minister earlier was perhaps a bit of self-interest to see whether the things that I believed to be absolutely critical when I was stewarding discussions in the Government are being maintained at the heart of the Government. We have to recognise—Mr Rennie made this point, with which I completely agree—that tackling child poverty must be multifaceted. No area of Government should be left out of activity to tackle child poverty.

It is reassuring that ministers have put on the record for the committee, in relation to its report, the importance that is attached to cross-ministerial working through the tackling child poverty programme board and the ministerial group on driving down child poverty, which is absolutely fundamental to the work.

It is also important to consider the perspective of external organisations, which can provide substantial challenge to the agenda that the Government is taking forward.

Miles Briggs: I felt that I had to intervene on John Swinney in the debate, to be quite honest. I want to ask about one of the key parts of the issue—the report touches on this—which is that employability schemes can be vulnerable and face budget cuts. I know that Mr Swinney cut employability schemes when he was finance secretary. Why are employability schemes being at the heart of decision making in Government, and the cross-party and cross-Government approach, not working?

John Swinney: Such schemes are integral to the work on tackling child poverty—absolutely. When I removed funding from employability support, the one thing that I checked before I did so was whether there was capacity to absorb anyone who still wished to be part of those employability programmes. Although I may have removed money because I had to deal with rising inflation and cuts to the budget from the United Kingdom Conservative Government, I made sure that there was still provision for anyone who wished to come forward for employability support to have it.

What the child poverty action plan has delivered has been formidable. The committee narrates that, in 2021-22, 23 per cent of children in Scotland were living in relative poverty; the Government

estimates that the current figure is about 19 per cent. The modelling demonstrates that if the Government was not applying its policies—if it had not put the child payment and other measures in place—child poverty in Scotland might be at 28 per cent.

To Carol Mochan, who asked what the Government is doing about all this and what powers have been used, I say that the Government is making interventions that have reduced the level of child poverty from what would exist if the Scottish Government was not acting. All that is happening against the backdrop of the prevailing austerity that we have had in our public finances for 14 years, in addition to the significant challenges that we have faced from soaring inflation. When we look at performance in Scotland, we see that the direct interventions of the Scottish Government are resulting in fewer children being in poverty than would be the case if the Scottish Government was not acting as it is acting.

I absolutely loathe the word that I am about to use—destitution—but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's estimate is that destitution is rising at a slower rate in Scotland under the climate of austerity than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. I know that Carol Mochan does not like comparisons with the rest of the United Kingdom, and I despise the fact that, in 21st century Scotland, we are still talking about destitution, but that shows what the Government's actions are delivering in the face of the poverty-inducing agenda that has been at the heart of Conservative policy since 2010.

Carol Mochan: I hope that John Swinney recognises that I do not shy away from saying that I understand that different policies across the nations result in different levels of child poverty, but does he understand that we need to talk in this Parliament about what more we can do? Sometimes it feels as though the Government will not address other things that can be done. It feels as though it spends a lot of time debating its superiority over other Governments in the UK, which can be frustrating for people who spend their whole lives saying that more can be done.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): In conclusion, Mr Swinney.

John Swinney: I am all for more being done. I am all for supercharging. I am all for going further and faster. What I am pointing out to Parliament is that the actions of the Scottish Government have delivered real and substantive reductions in child poverty at a time when the prevailing climate in the United Kingdom is that poverty is increasing as a result of the austerity agenda of the Conservative Government.

When it comes to going further and faster, we have to be able to take more steps on employability. I agree with Mr Rennie's point about the role of the third sector and securing greater involvement for such organisations. On public transport, I am going through a very agitated period in my life about public transport provision in my constituency. The more the matter is addressed in the interests of the wider public, the better.

I ask the Government to maintain, please, the focus on cross-portfolio working to ensure that every element of Government is brought together to tackle child poverty in Scotland.

16:10

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the committee for its detailed work and report on this issue and, of course, the third sector organisations that have shared immensely important and helpful briefings.

This is another debate that, in a just and compassionate world, we would not need to have. No child should be living in poverty anywhere, and the fact that so many do, in a hugely prosperous country such as ours, is a source of deep collective shame. We sometimes speak glibly about equality, but there is no greater inequality than this: whether a child goes to bed hungry and cold primarily depends on how much money their parents have. In turn, except for a privileged few, that largely depends on what kind of work the parents do.

When we think about it objectively, that is a ridiculous and incredibly unfair situation. It is one that we can mitigate and, to some extent, with the Scottish child payment and other social security measures, we have done. I am proud of the part that the Scottish Greens have played in that regard. Important as those measures are—as we have heard, they are keeping many children away from the brink of poverty—they, alone, are not enough.

As the committee's report demonstrates, addressing parental employment must be an important and urgent part of our response. For that response to be effective, we need some fundamental changes. We need to change some mistaken beliefs and assumptions. We need to change the way in which we view, value and deliver childcare. We need to change our economy—what it does, what it enables and who it works for.

One myth is that parents are not already working. As the Poverty Alliance has pointed out, more than two thirds of children in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is in paid work, but that work pays too little or covers too few

hours to meet a family's basic needs. That is shocking. Whether we are talking about deliberately exploitative employers, small enterprises that are, themselves, squeezed by financial pressures, or care and transport deficits that limit availability for work, that is a failing system. In other words, it is not families that are failing.

That is why it is so important that the best start, bright futures delivery plan aims not only to increase access to employment but, specifically, to increase earnings. That is why fair work really matters—work that provides an effective voice for employees, opportunities to develop and learn, job security, human fulfilment and real respect.

We know that being a parent is work in and of itself. That, too, should be valued.

Another myth is that all types of family are facing the same challenges. I share the disappointment that was expressed by Close the Gap that the committee did not choose to take a gendered approach to its investigation. It is not an eradication of the existence or importance of fathers for us to recognise that most primary care givers and the vast majority of lone parents are women, and that those women are encouraged to seek jobs in low-paid, inflexible and undervalued sectors. On the contrary, acknowledgement of those realities allows us to see and articulate the particular challenges that are faced by single and care-giving fathers, which might often be less about financial pressures and more about societal attitudes and assumptions.

Collectively, we need to change the way in which childcare is seen, valued and provided. The recent funding announcement was very welcome, but the problem is wider and deeper than childcare workers' pay. Childcare, as we have heard, needs to be affordable, accessible and flexible, and it cannot be limited to school hours or a traditional 9-to-5 working day. With the decline in the number of childminders, family members and informal networks often come forward to fill in childcare gaps, but, for many people, those are unavailable, including when family members move for work or study.

The special challenges that student parents face were rightly highlighted in the committee's report, and I urge all colleges and universities to follow the sensitive approach that some have pioneered.

We should recognise, too, that different children have very different needs—socially, developmentally, physically and emotionally—and that those needs change throughout their childhood and adolescence. We need to employ our imaginations as well as our intelligence and recognise the many dimensions and relationships of our own lives, and we must not expect those of

families in poverty to be any less complex or nuanced.

I particularly commend the childcare vision and principles that are set out by Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland, and I hope to see them widely accepted and implemented.

We need fundamental changes in our wider economy. As the report wisely highlights, nothing short of a whole-system approach will be enough. Inclusion Scotland and the Poverty Alliance have both outlined some of the most critical elements: the need for accessible, safe and free public transport; 10-minute neighbourhoods; living hours provision; and flexible and home working. All those things should be made available much more widely.

A just transition is deeply needed—away from the obscenity of an £8 million pay package for BP's chief and towards a just green economy that is, at its heart, an economy of solidarity and care. However, that is not only about renewable technologies, important though they are, but about all the work that creates, builds and grows a healthy Scotland and a peaceful world.

I close by speaking directly to the families and children who are in poverty and to the parents who struggle daily to give their children what they need and deserve: you are not invisible, you are not forgotten and this is not your fault. It is our job to sort it out.

16:17

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, thank the committee clerks for their diligent work in drafting such a comprehensive report and all those who supported the inquiry.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that the best way to tackle child poverty is to ensure that parents are in paid employment and earning a decent wage. It is very concerning that more than a third of children who are in poverty live in households that cannot get work, so delivering a growing economy with employment is key to tackling child poverty.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice—who, unfortunately, has just left the chamber—partially agrees with that approach, which was detailed in the Scottish Government's response to the committee's recommendations. She said that the Scottish Government

"recognises the importance of increasing family incomes from work and earnings as key component of achieving a balanced and sustainable approach to breaking the cycle of child poverty".

I agree with the cabinet secretary's statement in the same letter, in which she reaffirmed the Scottish Government's view that

“a sustainable exit from poverty will never be just about securing and retaining a job”.

However, securing and retaining parental employment is a crucial element in addressing child poverty, and that cannot be overlooked. That is particularly important for women, and I am grateful to Close the Gap for providing its briefing ahead of today’s debate. It states:

“action to address women’s labour market inequalities is vital for tackling child poverty.”

Parents still face barriers to employment such as poor childcare provision, lack of support when re-entering education and a failing transport system. Not being able to access childcare was the most common barrier to employment that was raised in response to the committee’s call for views. For example, the Scottish Women’s Convention quoted a mother who was struggling to juggle work and childcare. She said:

“There are no childcare providers through there, so you’re constantly having to look into what family or friends are available ... no women can develop in their work, or their career until their child has reached a high school age.”

Accessible, affordable and flexible childcare is essential to support parents into sustainable employment.

The “Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan: progress report 2022-2023” recognised the need for more accessible, flexible and high-quality childcare, and a recent review of the impact of childcare on parental poverty noted that formal childcare is an

“indispensable part of a policy toolkit”

for tackling child and in-work poverty. Unfortunately, the toolkit is missing a wrench and a couple of spanners.

I must again mention the City of Edinburgh Council’s proposal to phase out funded childcare in private and independent nurseries for parents who live outside the city. That will have a massively detrimental impact on my constituents in Fife who commute to Edinburgh for work.

I was recently informed that, because of the deferred start date for primary 1 as a result of the Give Them Time campaign, North Lanarkshire Council will not allow three-year-olds to start their funded hours the day after their third birthday. The reports that some councils are looking at cutting the provision entirely in some areas due to lack of staff are deeply worrying.

Removing parents’ ability to choose a blend of childcare provision goes against the Government’s commitment to getting it right for every child, and it actively hinders parents who want to return to work. The committee’s recommendation that the Scottish Government should

“reassess the scope to accelerate and scale up its work in this area”

and should announce

“the exact timing, hours of provision, eligibility and income thresholds”

as soon as possible is therefore an important recommendation, and one of which the cabinet secretary should take note.

The Government could make a marked difference by ensuring that there is adequate provision in proximity to places of work or learning. I suggest that, instead of making things harder for private nurseries, the Government should look at ways of increasing the number of on-site nurseries on school campuses, for example. Streamlining the funding process to ensure that the money does, indeed, follow the child would certainly give parents increased flexibility to choose the blend of childcare that is correct for them.

The Scottish Childminding Association described the decline in its workforce as follows:

“In the six years of ELC expansion, the childminding workforce has declined by 34 per cent, which means, in real terms, a loss of 1,926 childminding businesses and more than 11,000 childminding places for families.”

In undertaking its annual audit for the Scottish Government, the association looks at where authorities are as regards their childminder offer. It projected that

“those trends are set almost to double by July 2026 unless we take urgent action.”—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 25 May 2023; c 4-5.]

That is a sobering thought.

I also want to use my speech to highlight the importance of the public transport options that are available and how they can be used to encourage parents back into the workforce. We need to make it possible for people to make orbital trips between suburbs without having to travel via city centres, and we must engage in joined-up thinking on more workable transport options.

I will give an example. I was approached by Fife College, which recently had to cancel a fully subscribed course on its Kirkcaldy campus simply because the time of the bus route had changed. That is not the first time that that has happened. It is surely not beyond the realms of the combined intelligence of organisations in local government, local transport and local education to ensure that they work together on processes to provide a proper, sensible solution.

I fear that, if we do not find sensible solutions, we will actively force families to stay in an imposed poverty trap in which self-worth, pride and individual achievement are sidelined by hopelessness and reliance on others. That cannot continue.

The Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Dunbar, who will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:23

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): At the heart of the committee's report is a recognition that, if we want to tackle child poverty through parental employment, a wide range of interventions needs to be available, because we cannot focus on just one. As Bob Doris said, Dumfries and Galloway Council covered that issue very well in its submission to the committee, in which it said:

"There is no single thing which could be prioritised ... The approach must be considered as a whole system approach not separate policies or interventions."

Therefore, we need to look at a wide range of interventions in relation to access to childcare, transport, training and education.

As I read the report, which discusses what more could be done in each area, I found myself wondering what is being done in Aberdeen. After all, when my SNP colleagues won control of Aberdeen City Council, they spoke about how they wanted to make Aberdeen a better place to grow up in, and I know that work is being done across the city to make that a reality.

The report states:

"Flexible childcare was a priority for participants of the Committee's focus group and visits."

I saw a fantastic example of flexible childcare recently, when I visited Cummings Park nursery in my Aberdeen Donside constituency—where, if they need to, folk can book spaces on an hourly basis rather than on a day rate. I met the nursery's hard-working team along with Susan McGhee, the chief executive of Flexible Childcare Services Scotland. The new home of Cummings Park nursery is absolutely amazing. It provides a great environment for our young people to learn and grow.

Given that the report looks at education and training provision, I found myself thinking of the work that is done by ABZ Works, Aberdeen City Council's employability and skills service. That initiative was launched in 2021. It helps parents and carers across Aberdeen to access the Scottish Government's parental employability support fund. The support that ABZ Works can offer to parents now includes free training and funding; certified training courses; coaching to build digital skills; help to find childcare; and financial support to ease the transition into employment. That is a fantastic example of what can be done when Aberdeen City Council works with the Scottish Government to the benefit of the many folk who call our city home.

To take childcare provision and education together, I was saddened, recently, to hear from a constituent who was struggling to access the UK Government's tax-free childcare scheme. They found out that, if they went to university, their household would lose its entitlement to tax-free childcare. Without saying what that course is—so as not to identify my constituent—I can say that it is particularly demanding and that its graduates are particularly in demand.

The value to that household of a year of tax-free childcare could be thousands of pounds. That could make the difference between my constituent deciding to go to university this September or waiting until their child is old enough to qualify for the Scottish Government's 1,140 hours of free childcare.

Although tax-free childcare currently sits under His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, that policy has knock-on implications across a range of devolved policy areas, including early years and higher education, and for the sector that my constituent would seek to work in after their degree. Although tax-free childcare is not explicitly mentioned in the report, my constituent's situation is an example of why we need a whole-system approach.

The report goes on to discuss public transport provision. Aberdeen is said to have the highest rate of car ownership of any city in the UK. That says something, probably, about the need for improved public transport in the city and about the challenges that are associated with realising that. Through a combination of the expansion of free bus travel and bus prioritisation—supported by over £10 million of Scottish Government funding, which I commend Douglas Lumsden on applying for during his time as the council's finance convener—things are slowly starting to get better.

However more—something bigger—needs to be done. That is exactly what I am hoping will be delivered in the coming years. In particular, I am keen for Aberdeen rapid transit to roll out across our city: a city-wide mass transit system that could help to improve the timing, frequency and reliability of public transport in Aberdeen—which, in turn, could and should unlock employment opportunities and provide a lever for reducing child poverty.

I have not had time to touch on a lot that is in the report, but I will finish by focusing quickly on the success of the work that has been done in recent years. The report mentions modelling that suggested that,

"without ... the impact of Scottish Government policies, ... child poverty might be around 28% this year"—

as John Swinney said. That is significantly more than the estimate of 19 per cent, which is still too high.

A range of decisions by the Parliament, not least to implement and increase the Scottish child payment, is making a real difference. More needs to be done. As the report highlights, that spans a wide range in Government, from early years to higher and further education, transport, fair work, social security and local government. I am confident that Scotland is moving in the right direction. That is certainly helped by the strong desire, across the chamber and the nation, to give the next and future generations the best possible start in life.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:29

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is paramount in tackling child poverty. Encouraging and supporting parents into employment is a crucial way to ensure that children are lifted above the poverty line. The Scottish Government has paid that far too little attention in recent years, as Carol Mochan rightly pointed out.

The consultation process for this inquiry found that many individuals see childcare as the most important factor in securing a well-paid job. As Miles Briggs said, finding affordable and flexible childcare is the biggest obstacle that many parents face in seeking employment or returning to work. That disproportionately affects single parents, who continue to struggle to find good-quality employment that allows them to juggle childcare responsibilities. In the statistics, we see a gender disparity once again, as women are much more likely to be primary caregivers, and account for 91 per cent of single parents in Scotland.

The expense of childcare can be incredibly high. Meghan Gallacher pointed out that it can be up to £1,000 per child a month. That means that a big percentage of a single mother's salary needs to be dedicated to funding childcare if they wish to remain in employment. The current 1,140 hours of funded childcare cover only the duration of an average school day. That means that single parents—who are often women—are limited in the hours that they can seek in employment. That often leads to single mothers being stuck in a pattern of working in part-time jobs.

As my colleague Paul O'Kane pointed out, in the latest budget, the Scottish Government cancelled a promised £53 million in funding for employability schemes and scrapped the parental transition fund entirely. Parents need to have ample opportunity

to seek out a decent wage in addition to having adequate childcare options. Scottish Labour is committed to improved access to early years childcare. The Scottish Government has to be transparent about whether it intends to make additional resources available. As the inquiry points out, the programme for government does not set out what funding will be available to meet the new childcare commitments. A detailed spending plan is needed to show how it aims to achieve that, with relevant timescales.

It is clear that the labour market in Scotland is not working for everyone. Marie McNair rightly pointed out the barriers to parents accessing fair work. The Poverty Alliance has emphasised that more than two-thirds of children in poverty live in households where someone is in paid work. Access to fair work is crucial. One way that we can achieve that is by ensuring that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same opportunities in the labour market as their peers. Labour's new deal for working people will tackle the scourge of in-work poverty by making work pay and supporting parents' progress in work.

Scottish Labour understands that only by delivering secure jobs and fair pay can we drive down poverty in Scotland for good. The committee's inquiry highlighted the importance of good-quality flexible work as a route out of poverty. That needs to be done in conjunction with targeted support for those who are not able to work.

The repercussions and consequences of a childhood below the poverty line can be long lasting. It can have an impact on both physical and mental health, and so create strain on our already overworked national health service. It can also affect education and children's ability to learn and develop, and significantly reduce their life opportunities and experiences. That is why Scottish Labour welcomes the recommendations in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's report. Tackling child poverty was outlined as the Scottish Government's national mission. Let us now see that mission being acted on.

16:35

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am happy to close the debate on the committee's report on addressing child poverty through parental employment, on behalf of my party. I am proud of the work that the committee has done over the past year or so. I thank everyone who contributed to our report, all who engaged with us as we gathered evidence, and our clerks for their help in drafting the report. Sadly, I am the last member standing in that I am the only member who was on

the committee at the beginning of the inquiry and is still on the committee today.

I will pick up on an interesting point that Maggie Chapman made. It would be worth checking, but I estimate that around 90 per cent of the people we took evidence from and who told us about their experiences were women. Although we did not deliberately take that approach, the report therefore reflects many of the views held by women in Scotland today.

Child poverty in any form is absolutely unacceptable. It is a shame on all of us that, in 21st century Scotland, children are still going to bed hungry. I hope that our report can be part of a conversation that will move us towards eradicating poverty in this country.

The report is long, but a number of excellent speakers were able to outline its key findings. Miles Briggs and other members mentioned data. Paul O'Kane and others spoke about achieving change further and faster. Undoubtedly, the debate has concentrated on two factors: childcare and transport. I will spend the short time that is available to me by highlighting a couple of the findings that have already been picked up. Everyone has identified those two issues, but we have to start working together on finding solutions to them.

If we are to get people into work, we have to ensure that they can get there in the first place. We no longer live in the world of the last century, in which our local communities provided ample working opportunities. Instead, we live in a society in which the majority of people have to undertake some form of commute before they get to their place of work. If someone is unable to drive because of financial restraints or disability, their only option is to use public transport. Unfortunately, there can be a lack of such services, especially for people who do not live in cities. For example, a few years ago, before I came to the Parliament, I considered applying for a job in the Highlands. There was one bus per day from the centre of the place where I would be working to the place where I might live, and one bus per day back again, which meant that it was never going to be possible for me to do that job.

The report highlights the major issue of people who work shifts or who need to travel outside office hours, when the frequency of transport services can be much reduced or even non-existent. During our evidence gathering, several respondents raised concerns about the recent cancellation of vital bus routes across the country. That underlines the findings of the report that the Parliament's cross-party group on disability produced on the experience of disabled people across the country. Over and over again, we heard that there is a lack of bus services for people who

live in more remote areas, which makes it near impossible for people without cars to get around easily there. The problem is even worse for people with disabilities, because much of our public transport is not accessible. We have heard about train stations with no lifts or ramps and buses that have space for only one wheelchair or buggy to be on board at a time.

If we are hoping to address child poverty by encouraging parents into employment, we must ensure that they can get to their place of work. For that reason, I strongly underline the committee's recommendations to the Scottish Government on considering how public transport services can be designed and better supported to provide more affordable, frequent and direct services for young people and for parents.

I will finish by talking briefly about employability services. The support that they can provide to those who aspire to be in work can be truly life changing. Over the past year I have met representatives of Fedcap, which is a provider of such services here in my Lothian region, but also works across the country. Some of the stories that I heard were inspiring, and they showed the difference that investment in people can make to their lives. As we say in the committee report, it is very important that the Government makes it clear how it will scale up employability services, especially following the end of the fair start Scotland contract this year, and how, specifically, it will allocate funds to employability for parents.

I whole-heartedly endorse the committee's report and I hope that, in her closing speech, the minister can shed some light on how the Government will address some of our recommendations.

16:41

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I thank the members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee for securing the debate, for their report and for the very considered recommendations within it. We have only really begun to scratch the surface of those recommendations today, as Jeremy Balfour said. The report is a long read, but a good one.

Tackling child poverty is a central mission of the Scottish Government. It is clear from the committee's report and from what we have heard today that, while there is certainly more that needs to be done in different areas—by the Scottish Government, local government and the UK Government—the Scottish Government is taking action to ensure that families are protected from poverty and are given the opportunity to thrive here in Scotland. It is right to point that out. At the

outset, I wish to confirm that the Scottish Government believes that we have a path to meet our child poverty targets. It will be difficult—it is challenging—but we are absolutely determined to do so.

I have to say that that is made more difficult by UK Government policies, which have an impact on what the Scottish Government can do with its budget. They also have a direct impact on the people of Scotland. I, therefore, gently, say to Meghan Gallacher that it is not “politicking” to bring up the two-child cap. That is reality for people in every one of our constituencies and that is the context in which we are having this debate.

Many members quite rightly indicated that they would like the Scottish Government to go further. The committee’s term for that is for us to “supercharge” our efforts. We take that challenge very seriously, and we quite rightly have to do that, as a Government and as a Parliament. I point out to everyone in the chamber that we have just gone through a budget process where the Government has had to make difficult decisions, and where all parties have had the opportunity to come forward with costed proposals if they think that we should be doing something differently, spending money differently, not spending it on something or spending more money somewhere else. Within the budget that was passed, there was £3 billion of investment from the Scottish Government to tackle poverty and protect people from harm. Carol Mochan and others ask what we have been doing—that £3 billion of investment is exactly what we are doing.

Of course we need to see what more can be done, and that is why the Government looked at the parental transition fund. Unfortunately, when we get down to the difficulties around devolution and what is reserved, it is impossible for the Government, within the powers that we have, to develop such a fund, because of the intricacies of the tax system. That is just a statement of fact; it is not politicking. It is a matter of what we can do that is not the parental transition fund—which we do not have the powers to implement.

What more can we do around these issues? When the Deputy First Minister unveiled the budget, she absolutely committed to multiyear funding for employability schemes. That was one of the major asks that came through from the sector.

When we look at what the Government is doing, we can see the modelling that has recently come out, which forecasts that there will be 100,000 fewer children in relative child poverty because of the Scottish Government’s policies. That is direct action that is making a difference. However, once again, I do not shy away from the fact that poverty

levels in this country remain too high and that there absolutely is more to be done.

In one of his interventions and in his speech, Mr Swinney talked about the importance of cross-party working and the need for Government departments to work together. He mentioned the meetings that he used to chair, which I remember fondly. I am not sure whether this is a reassurance, but I hope that he will be reassured that I now chair cross-ministerial group meetings on tackling child poverty. We recognise that we need to look very seriously at a number of issues within Government, as many members have pointed out.

One issue that many people have spoken about is childcare. We have quite rightly focused on that today, because childcare has a significant impact on the families that need it and on those who work in the sector. In 2024-25, we will continue to invest around £1 billion in high-quality funded ELC. That will ensure that we continue to deliver a very high-quality service. Earlier, in an intervention on Mr Rennie, I quoted some of the recent Scottish household survey results that show that. We are, of course, determined to go further.

Meghan Gallacher *rose*—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am happy to give way to Meghan Gallacher.

The Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand for interventions.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the cabinet secretary engage with the private sector to ensure that nurseries do not continue to close their doors? That will make the childcare policy fail, and nobody wants that. The Government must engage with the private sector and sort out the problems to get the childcare roll-out back on track.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I know from my time in education that we engage heavily with many stakeholders, including private providers in healthcare, and I know that that has carried on. I am trying to get some consensus with Meghan Gallacher. That is often hard for us, but I will endeavour to do my best. I, too, recognise that the private, voluntary and independent sector is an integral part of what we have in Scotland and that it must have a successful future to ensure that it delivers for families and continues to deliver a high-quality service.

Now that I have tried to get some consensus with the Conservatives, I will move on with my speech. I hope that the attempt was appreciated this time around.

Willie Rennie *rose*—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am also willing to be consensual with Mr Rennie, if I can be.

Willie Rennie: I omitted to mention the First Minister's commitment when he stood for the leadership of the SNP that he would close the gap between the provision for council nurseries and the provision for the PVI sector. The education minister wrote to me yesterday and basically said that the Government will not be able to meet that commitment. Why is that the case? Why are we not making progress towards closing the gap, especially as the First Minister promised that we would?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Rennie has me at a bit of a disadvantage because, funnily enough, I have not seen the letter that the minister wrote to him yesterday. However, I have pointed out that the Scottish Government has provided £16 million of uplift to pay in order to make progress on that issue. That will not fully close the gap, but it is progress. I am sure that, if Mr Rennie is not satisfied with his reply from the minister, it will not be the last that she has heard from him on that.

I also point to the on-going work on ensuring that we scale up the role of childminders. I accept that there has been a decrease in childminding, as members have pointed out, and that we need to look very seriously at that.

A number of members have mentioned transport. I point to the fair fares review that is coming forward.

We know that employability services have had a positive impact, but that there is still work to do to ensure that people are assisted into work. I once again give a commitment that we will do that in partnership with parents, not against them, that we will ensure that there is sustainable and fair work for them and that there will be no threat of sanctions within that.

It is also important to look at the benefits that we have and at eligibility within the social security system. That is why we continue to do what we can to extend eligibility. A recent example of that is our best foods grant, where we estimate that another 20,000 families will be able to benefit from healthy food and milk. Again, that demonstrates what we are doing and will continue to do within social security.

Members are right: the best way to deliver on that is through employment. That is something that we must consider right across Government and I assure members that we will continue to do so.

The Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris to wind up the debate on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

16:50

Bob Doris: I begin by doing what I did not do at the start, which is thank the clerking team and all

those behind the scenes who made our inquiry possible, as well as those who gave evidence to it. I did not do that at the start, which was remiss of me.

I am pleased that we have had an opportunity today to reflect on the committee's wide-ranging report and the striking evidence that we heard throughout our inquiry. The report has clearly brought to light the importance of strong governance and robust infrastructure to support the development of the best possible parental employment offer. I will focus briefly on employability services and the role of employers before I come on to members' contributions.

Scottish employability services include a range of devolved and reserved programmes, with local employability partnerships deciding on their own priorities and activities. I put that on record because it came up during the debate, when the minister highlighted the fact that the Scottish iteration of employability services does not include consequences or sanctions for those who do not take part in particular programmes.

The system is complex and can be hard to navigate for parents who may be battling with financial issues or securing childcare, or who lack confidence to take the steps to progress in the job market. One Parent Families Scotland highlighted that parents who are in poverty and stressed find it very difficult even to think about looking for a job. Being able to obtain and sustain a good job and providing for their children is an individual journey for parents. Some will need person-centred support to build essential skills, whereas others will benefit from work-based training to develop their careers. Jackie Dunbar spoke about how that can be possible and told us about ABZ Works in Aberdeen. If that can happen in Aberdeen, why can it not happen systematically and routinely across the country? We must look at, and share, best practice.

Family-friendly jobs that pay a fair wage are essential to maximising parental employment and preventing in-work poverty. The Scottish Government has said that it will use all available levers to make fair work the norm across the economy. Private sector employers must be encouraged and incentivised to implement the right practices and to make changes to match their business needs with the right career opportunities for parents. Witnesses came up with a range of initiatives that they believe could make a difference, such as partnerships with large employers, accreditation and reward schemes and tax rebates for socially responsible employers. The committee urges the Scottish Government to prioritise parents' needs when devising offers and schemes for the private sector.

I also note that there was lively debate about where employment law should sit to enable us to do all those things and that others put it on record that the STUC and the IPPR think that employment law should sit here. Because I am speaking on behalf of the committee, I will leave that idea hanging, rather than taking a view on it at the moment. *[Interruption.]* I think that Mr Balfour probably knows my view on that.

We also had a mini budget debate near the start of today's contributions. Paul O'Kane and others were demanding more funds, which I understand and expect, with Meghan Gallacher specifically mentioning local authorities. Carol Mochan mentioned the parental transition fund and the cabinet secretary explained why she thought that that could not be brought forward. I am keen to know where that money will be used effectively elsewhere.

In an intervention on Mr O'Kane, Mr Swinney suggested that there would be even less money in the coming financial year, because £500 million-worth of Labour tax policies have been brought forward by the UK Government. In response to that, Mr O'Kane mentioned economic growth. An important point to make is that, when Mr Swinney suggested that, based on modelling, the Scottish child payment is reducing child poverty to 19 per cent, that is a £450 million commitment not to getting people out of poverty but to tackling the manifestation of poverty in society. To get people out of poverty sustainably, we need to get them into well-paid, meaningful jobs. That is why the committee's report is so important, irrespective of party-political views.

We heard a lot about transport during the debate, which was not surprising. Mr Rennie and others talked about rural transport issues. As an urban MSP, John Mason reminded us that cities have issues as well. We seemed to get to a consensus when Roz McCall and John Mason spoke about towns and cities becoming transport hubs. Roz McCall mentioned orbital routes and others, and the importance of allowing people to travel the routes that they need to in order to make transport sustainable for them and their families. Those routes are simply not available in many cases.

Some members mentioned the provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. I suppose that the jury is out on that, Presiding Officer. I am conscious that, tomorrow, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport is looking at potential franchising arrangements for Glasgow and the west. As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, rather than as a Glasgow MSP, I would be interested to know whether, when those new powers are brought in, the strategic transport authorities will think carefully about the journeys

that parents and families need to make, especially night-shift workers, weekend workers or those who need to work antisocial hours. Franchising may be one solution, but only if it knits together all the competing demands of working families in order to make the journeys that they need to make possible. The jury is out on that, and we will see where it goes.

In response to demands for more spending on concessionary travel, Mr Swinney, who seems to have spoken frequently in the debate, mentioned the possibility of a tapered or temporary expansion of that for a period of time for those who are moving into employment. That is worth noting.

The central debate—and Mr Balfour acknowledged that this issue was at the heart of it—has been about flexibility and the effectiveness of high-quality childcare provision across local authorities. The minister commented on the variability in the quality of some of that provision. Meghan Gallacher suggested that the central role that local authorities play in the delivery of childcare may squeeze out other providers, particularly those in the private, voluntary and independent sector. There was some discussion about that.

Miles Briggs suggested that there is a lack of flexibility in relation to doing something different, which is something that Mr Swinney and others disputed and, again, there was a lively debate about that. The question that is left hanging is that, if some local authorities can use their statutory obligations and commitments to provide flexibility and be innovative, why can others not? If the powers are there, why are all local authorities not doing that?

The discussion about the early years workforce was important. Consistently at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, as well as in the chamber, Mr Rennie has raised his concern that staff in the independent sector are moving to local authorities because the employment that is offered is well paid and more secure. He raised concern about the gaps that that could be leaving and the potential decline of that sector. Mr Rennie mentioned that pay was one of the reasons why staff could be making that move. Marie McNair mentioned that, irrespective of where childcare staff are employed, it is important that they are sufficiently skilled. She gave an example of case in which staff who have the appropriate training are not always available to work with young people who have additional support needs. Marie McNair put that on the record from her own experience.

Maggie Chapman said that, although pay is important, we should think about raising the status and importance of childcare in our society more generally, which is something that we can forget.

Finally, Roz McCall said, and it is worth mentioning, that whether we are looking at the private, voluntary and independent sector, childminders or local authorities, we need to see what a blended childcare approach looks like in order to get the balance and flexibility right for most parents and providers.

The committee's inquiry and the debate have highlighted that breaking the cycle of child poverty is a tough mission that can be achieved only through collaboration and decisive action. The committee does not underestimate the challenge of effective governance and leadership across portfolios in difficult economic times. However, the progress on some priorities has been slow and time is short.

We thank the Scottish Government for its response to our report and look forward to receiving progress updates on the best start, bright futures delivery plan. As a committee that puts great stock in tracking progress, we will carefully monitor progress against the plan and the child poverty targets until the end of the parliamentary session. The Scottish Government has carefully planned its approach to parental employment, but it is time to move forward and deliver more, providing a strong foundational infrastructure whereby parents can thrive in employment, contribute to the economy and build the best possible future for their children.

I thank all members for their contributions. Our committee looks forward to reflecting on this debate as we take forward our work in the area.

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-12479, in the name of Angela Constance, on the legislative consent motion on the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 8 November 2023, relating to investigatory powers, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Angela Constance*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-12468, in the name of Collette Stevenson, on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, on addressing child poverty through parental employment, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's 11th Report, 2023 (Session 6), *Addressing Child Poverty Through Parental Employment* (SP Paper 476).

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-12479, in the name of Angela Constance, on the legislative consent motion on the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 8 November 2023, relating to investigatory powers, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here:
www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/what-was-said-and-official-reports/official-reports

Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447
Fax: 0131 348 5423

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 11 April 2024

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

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba