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Thursday 28 March 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
NHS Highland Capital Funding (Grantown Health Centre)	1
Museum Sector (Support)	2
Puberty-suppressing Hormones (Under-16s).....	3
Asylum Seekers (Mental Wellbeing).....	5
Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022	6
Tenant Support.....	7
Scottish Child Payment (Aberdeen)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Hate Incidents (Recording).....	10
Scottish Government Leadership	14
Artificial Pitches (Infill)	17
XL Bully-type Dogs (Definition).....	18
Glasgow School of Art (Restoration)	21
New Deal for Tenants	22
People with Learning Difficulties and Complex Needs (Care)	24
South Lanarkshire Care Homes (Closure)	24
Valve Components Ltd (Redundancies).....	25
Aye Write Book Festival (Funding).....	25
Salmon Exports (Impact of Brexit).....	26
National Union of Journalists (Industrial Action).....	27
VisitScotland Information Centres	28
CRYSTAL FM RADIO	29
<i>Motion debated—[Christine Grahame].</i>	
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	29
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	31
Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con).....	33
Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	35
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)	36
The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson).....	39
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	42
TRANSPORT	42
Rail Travel (Safety).....	42
ScotRail (Alcohol Ban).....	44
Public Transport (National Concessionary Scheme).....	46
Bus Services (Dumfries and Galloway).....	46
Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Bus Services Franchise)	48
Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Regional Bus Network)	49
Ferry Service (Rosyth and Zeebrugge)	50
Bus Provision in Banffshire and Buchan Coast (Engagement with Operators)	51
PUBLIC TRANSPORT (FAIR FARES REVIEW)	54
The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop)	54
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)	59
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	63
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	66
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP).....	68
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	70
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	73
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	76
Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP).....	79
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green).....	81
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	84
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP).....	87
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab).....	90

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	92
Fiona Hyslop	95
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	99
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam].</i>	
DECISION TIME	100

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 28 March 2024

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

General Question Time

NHS Highland Capital Funding (Grantown Health Centre)

1. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will reconsider its decision to pause capital funding for NHS Highland in respect of completion of the refurbishment of Grantown health centre, in light of reports that these works were nearly completed and that the pause of the contract may lead to additional costs in excess of the notional sum saved. (S6O-03284)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Based on the latest forecast, our block grant for capital is expected to reduce in real terms by 8.7 per cent by 2027-28, which is a cumulative loss of more than £1.3 billion. That has had an inevitable effect and led to difficult decisions, in common with all health capital investment projects that are in development. Phase 2 of the Grantown health centre project has been paused at this stage until the necessary capital funding becomes available.

Fergus Ewing: The cabinet secretary is aware of the cross-party campaign that is supported by me, Edward Mountain and Rhoda Grant—it is a non-political campaign. The cost of the project is £2.4 million but, unlike every other project in NHS Highland, it is nearly completed. Of the £2.4 million, costs of £2 million have already been incurred. The materials are on site, waiting to be installed. However, if the decision to pause is not overturned within the next three weeks, abortive costs will be incurred, which, together with the running costs of the old Victorian Ian Charles building that was to be decommissioned, will mean that the overall cost will far exceed the notional savings.

Will the cabinet secretary, whom we met yesterday and whose willingness to listen was much appreciated, seriously reconsider, given that a small sum of £400,000 would help to save this vital project that was promised to the community nearly a decade ago?

Neil Gray: I thank Fergus Ewing for his question. I am grateful for his engagement and that of Edward Mountain, Rhoda Grant and the Grantown-on-Spey medical practice in NHS Highland, all of whom, as Fergus Ewing said, met

me yesterday to discuss the situation. I am grateful for the further information that was provided by all the participants in the meeting. I gave a commitment yesterday that I would, without prejudice and without giving a commitment, consider the position and the potentially exceptional situation that exists there. I committed to coming back to those who were in the meeting as soon as I could.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, am pleased to be working with Rhoda Grant and Fergus Ewing. The 2015 redesign of healthcare in Strathspey and Badenoch required the closure of two hospitals and an upgrade of two general practitioner practices, including the Grantown practice. The non-completion of the Grantown medical centre, which was the final piece in the jigsaw, will leave this Government and NHS Highland without one shred of credibility in Speyside. I ask the cabinet secretary to reflect on that when he makes his decision.

Neil Gray: I thank Edward Mountain for reiterating a point that he raised with me yesterday. Of course, that will be part of the consideration in this case, and I look to take a swift decision—either positive or negative—as quickly as possible.

Museum Sector (Support)

2. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is supporting the museum sector. (S6O-03285)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government provides significant support to the museum sector and will continue to do so. For example, we have given cultural bodies, including National Museums Scotland, a funding uplift in 2024-25. We continue to support the national development body for Scotland's museum sector—Museums Galleries Scotland—and we have committed to provide an uplift of £800,000 to the V&A Dundee, despite the Scottish Government's challenging 2024-25 budget position. I am pleased that our investment continues to support our museums and world-class collections, ensuring that they are cared for and enjoyed by everybody across Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: I am sure that the minister will want to join me in welcoming this week's opening of the new Perth museum, which is a fantastic new resource that Perth and Kinross Council has created, with the assistance of £10 million from the UK Government by way of the Tay cities deal. The museum is now home to Scotland's stone of destiny. How will the Scottish Government help Perth and Kinross Council to capitalise on the

economic and cultural opportunities that are offered by the new museum?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Murdo Fraser for raising the issue. I am very pleased that Perth museum will reopen on 30 March after a significant redevelopment project. Alongside the stone of destiny, the museum houses the Perth and Kinross collections, which are recognised as being of national significance, and is situated in one of Scotland's heritage buildings.

As Murdo Fraser knows, Perth museum will be managed in partnership with Perth and Kinross Council and Culture Perth and Kinross. The project was supported by the Tay cities region deal, which received funding from the Scottish Government, alongside other partners, including the UK Government and regional partners.

As I mentioned, the Scottish Government continues to provide funding to the national development body for Scotland's museums sector, MGS, which provides valuable strategic investment, advice, workforce development and advocacy.

Puberty-suppressing Hormones (Under-16s)

3. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): To ask the Scottish Government how many children aged 16 and under have been prescribed puberty suppressing hormones through NHS Scotland since 2014. (S6O-03286)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Sandyford young people's gender service, which is based in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, offers a range of support to young people and their families. Referral to paediatric endocrinology for consideration for endocrine intervention is only one potential option in the overall clinical pathway that is offered.

According to figures provided by NHS Scotland, from 2016 to December 2023, the Sandyford clinic referred just under 100 young people aged 16 or under to paediatric endocrinology in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lothian for further assessment for puberty blockers. Not all of the young people who were referred would have been assessed as being suitable to progress on to that medication.

I understand that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is currently reviewing its data systems, and I shall write to Ash Regan with the relevant information for the 2014 to 2016 period when it is available.

Ash Regan: Following medical evidence reviews, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, France and England now sharply restrict or prohibit the use of puberty blockers for gender

dysphoria. There is weak to no proof that they help, but there is much evidence of serious side effects. Puberty blockers prevent bone density development, they render children infertile and they can cause damage to the heart and severe depression. Class action lawsuits involving thousands of patients who have been damaged by puberty blockers are now under way in the US courts. What will it take for this Government to step in and protect Scotland's children from this unethical experiment?

Neil Gray: We are aware of the new clinical policy that NHS England has recently issued on the routine prescription of puberty-suppressing hormones for children and young people as a treatment option for gender dysphoria. The details of that are being closely considered by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, as the provider of the young people's gender service at Sandyford, and its relevant clinical team. Any decision on how such healthcare is delivered in Scotland will rightly be made by health boards and their clinicians.

It should be noted that NHS England's announcements follow its interim policy position last year and its recommendation that puberty blockers be accessed only via a research programme that it is establishing. The Scottish Government and NHS Scotland remain observers of that study development, and we are considering what further engagement may be appropriate.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The Cass review was clear in its recommendations. Given that the action that was taken in England was taken on the basis of a lack of evidence that puberty-suppressing hormones were safe or effective, many people in Scotland will be expecting action from the Government. What discussion has the cabinet secretary had with NHS Scotland in the light of the decision that has been taken in England? If action is to be taken here, will he set out to Parliament what the timescales are for such action?

Neil Gray: We have been consistently clear that the on-going findings of the Cass review, and that review's final report, once published, will be closely considered by both the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland, in the context of how such healthcare can be best delivered here in Scotland.

Although the Cass review extends only to services provided by NHS England, Scottish Government officials and NHS Scotland clinicians have met Dr Cass on many occasions to share information about improvement work in Scotland. We look forward to the outcome of that review.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We have much to get through, so concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Asylum Seekers (Mental Wellbeing)

4. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support the mental wellbeing of asylum seekers accommodated in hotels in Scotland. (S6O-03287)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Home Office is responsible for the provision of asylum accommodation and support and for the use of contingency hotels. The Scottish Government has consistently made it clear to the United Kingdom Government that hotels are not appropriate accommodation, and we continue to be concerned about the effect that prolonged stays in hotels have on people's wellbeing.

People seeking asylum who are living in Scotland are entitled to access healthcare, including referral to mental health services. The Scottish Government funds a range of action to support mental health and wellbeing and that is available to anyone living in Scotland, regardless of their residence status.

Maggie Chapman: The minister will be aware of the overwhelming evidence of worsening mental health among hotel-accommodated asylum seekers. There have been at least five suicide attempts in the past few months. Asylum seekers do not feel safe; they feel as if they are in open prisons. *The Ferret* and the Scottish Refugee Council have identified a rise in far-right hostility and the fact that about 500 asylum seekers have to share bedrooms with strangers as being contributory factors to that. How can the Scottish Government and public agencies, including the national health service, mitigate the impacts of those measures and provide increased safety, reassurance and mental health support to people who are seeking asylum?

Maree Todd: We absolutely recognise that the circumstances and uncertainty that asylum seekers and refugees face are often distressing and can lead to increased risk of suicide. In implementing the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities suicide prevention strategy "Creating Hope Together", we are working hard to tackle the inequalities that can lead to suicide and are prioritising communities and groups—including asylum seekers and refugees—with a heightened risk of suicide.

We are engaging with public sector partners, including the NHS, to improve the mental health and wellbeing of our asylum seeker and refugee community. We are also connecting with existing projects that support asylum seekers and refugees, such as the Mental Health Foundation's elevate project. We also continue to fund Simon Community Scotland, which is doing excellent

work in supporting asylum seekers and people with no recourse to public funds. This year, our partnership is delivering peer support for people living in Glasgow and is being developed to meet the specific needs of that community.

More widely—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I need to move to the next question.

Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022

5. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022. (S6O-03288)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The emergency act has provided tenants with extra protection and stability at a time when rents have been rising across the United Kingdom but, as Parliament agreed, it must come to an end on 31 March. All rent increase notices that are issued until 1 April must still comply with the cap, as well as giving three months' notice. We know that, although many landlords will continue to act responsibly from then on, there could—without action—have been cases of tenants facing sudden, extreme rent increases. I am therefore pleased that Parliament recently approved regulations to temporarily modify the rent adjudication process by which tenants can ask for a review of rent increases. That will protect tenants by preventing a cliff edge as we transition out of the emergency legislation, while continuing support for responsible landlords.

Ariane Burgess: During the 18 months of the emergency rent cap, the number of privately rented properties on the public landlord register has grown by more than 5,000, despite attempts by landlord groups and some Opposition members to claim the opposite. Yesterday, the minister published a bill that will deliver much of the new deal for tenants that was part of the Bute house agreement, including new rights for tenants and long-term rent controls. How does he think that those proposals should be greeted by responsible landlords, who want to provide a good and fair service?

Patrick Harvie: The member is right to say that the private rented sector has always been dynamic, with some landlords leaving and others entering. That is further demonstrated by the evidenced growth over the past 18 months in the number of registered properties that are available for private rent.

I acknowledge that there are limitations to the data. For example, there could be a time lag in

landlords deregistering properties. However, it is in the interests of tenants and responsible landlords to have a fair and well-regulated private rented sector, which can also be attractive to investors. Our proposals will help to improve affordability for tenants in the private rented sector while recognising the importance of landlords investing in the quality of their property.

Tenant Support

6. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to support tenants, in light of reports of accelerating rents. (S6O-03289)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): As I said in my answer to the previous question, the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022 has provided tenants with much-needed stability in tenancies at a time when rents have been rising across the United Kingdom. In 2023-24, we invested more than £83 million in discretionary housing payments, which are a vital tool to reduce poverty, safeguard tenancies and prevent homelessness.

I am delighted that the new housing legislation that was set out in the programme for government has now been introduced. The Housing (Scotland) Bill will enable the delivery of our commitment to longer-term proposals for private rented sector rent controls, the strengthening of tenants' rights and other protections, and duties that are aimed at preventing homelessness.

Katy Clark: I welcome the publication of the bill and congratulate Living Rent, tenants unions and all who have campaigned for rent controls legislation. As the minister knows, we face a housing emergency, and he referred to the concern about a cliff edge. The adjudication system that the Scottish Government is proposing is complicated, and there is concern about the burden on councils. Living Rent is calling for a rent cap. What consideration is being given to interim measures to help tenants while we wait for the legislation to come into force?

Patrick Harvie: I join the member in congratulating all those who have campaigned for progress in this area for a long time, as I have. I first proposed rent controls in the Parliament well over a decade ago, and I got very little support at that time from any part of the political spectrum. I am glad that the case has much more support today.

The member will be aware that the temporary emergency legislation that the Parliament passed had a time limit. If it had not had that time limit and had not been temporary emergency legislation, it

would have failed the legal test of proportionality and necessity, which we have to meet. That legislation was challenged in court, and the reason why we won that challenge was largely that we met the proportionality and necessity test because of the emergency legislation's temporary nature.

The adjudication provisions that we have drafted are by necessity more complicated than a rent cap, but we have put a great deal of effort into raising awareness of tenants' rights and making sure that they are able to exercise the rights and protections that are available to them.

Scottish Child Payment (Aberdeen)

7. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many children in Aberdeen have been lifted out of poverty since the inception of the Scottish child payment. (S6O-03290)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): It is estimated that the Scottish child payment will keep 60,000 children out of poverty in 2024-25. The impact cannot be broken down by local authority area. However, published statistics show that more than 327,000 children in low-income families were receiving the Scottish child payment in December 2023, and more than 10,000 of those children were in Aberdeen city. Since the Scottish child payment was launched, payments that total more than £570 million have been made to the families who need them most, and more than £18 million of those payments were to families in Aberdeen city.

Kevin Stewart: It is gratifying that the Scottish child payment has contributed to 100,000 children in Scotland being lifted out of poverty. Has the Scottish Government discussed with the United Kingdom Government whether it will replicate the scheme south of the border, given that possible Barnett consequential for Scotland could help us to do even more to lift people out of poverty here?

Paul McLennan: Yes. We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to make key changes to reserved benefits, including the introduction of an essentials guarantee and the reversal of damaging welfare cuts such as the two-child limit. Those steps would lift 40,000 children in Scotland out of poverty next year.

The First Minister wrote to Keir Starmer in January to find ways of working together to tackle poverty, should Labour form the next UK Government. No reply has been received from Labour or the current UK Government, and neither has indicated any intention to match the ambitious anti-poverty measures that are being taken here in Scotland.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The minister rightly points to the impact of the Scottish

child payment but, given last week's poverty and inequality statistics and his Government's budgetary decisions, which include slashing the housing and employability budgets, does he accept what the Institute for Public Policy Research, Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have said, which is that the interim poverty targets are at risk of being missed or are going to be missed? Does he agree with those experts?

Paul McLennan: We will continue to do all within our powers to reduce child poverty while mitigating the impact of the ingrained austerity of successive UK Governments. I come back to the point that I mentioned in my answer to Kevin Stewart—we have written to Keir Starmer about what he is currently saying, but we have had no answers back. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Paul McLennan: Another point is very important—in contrast, for example, the UK Government scrapped its child poverty target in 2016 and has continued its campaign of austerity. If Paul O'Kane wants to compare records, I note that children's groups, along with the Children's Commissioner for Wales, criticised the Labour-run Welsh Government in January for failing to set targets.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Hate Incidents (Recording)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind members that my wife is a serving officer with Police Scotland.

My colleague Murdo Fraser was the subject of a spurious complaint about a social media post that was critical of the Scottish National Party Government. He discovered that Police Scotland had recorded the complaint against him as a non-crime hate incident. No crime was committed, but he is now on the police record as a perceived offender in a supposed hate incident, despite never having been charged, tried, convicted or even informed that the police had a file on him.

How can it be right that innocent people are put on the police record when they have done nothing wrong?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will try to provide some context on the issue that Douglas Ross raises. It is important that, when we talk about hate, hatred, hate crime or, indeed, the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, we do so in a way that is not just considered but ensures that we stick to the facts.

First, we should remember that the recording of non-crime hate incidents came as a direct result of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. It was contained in recommendations 12 to 17 of the Macpherson report. The recording of non-crime incidents has been around for many years.

Secondly, as well as having been around for many years, the recording of non-crime incidents is done for other incidents that do not meet a criminal threshold, such as domestic abuse incidents. I do not know whether Douglas Ross is suggesting that domestic abuse incidents should not be recorded if they do not meet a criminal threshold, or whether his views apply only in relation to hate crime.

Thirdly, I will be clear: the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 is not yet in force, and nothing within it changes how hate crime or, indeed, a non-crime hate incident is recorded. I will make that point by quoting Professor James Chalmers, who is well known to members. He says that the recording of non-crime hate incidents

“is a long-standing feature of police practice. Communicating clearly just how little the Act changes is essential to avoid both undue fears about its impact and any attempts to abuse it.”

Lastly—I know that this is a substantial issue— notwithstanding what I have quoted, Police Scotland made it clear last year, and again recently because of press inquiries, that it will review how non-crime hate incidents are recorded, in cognisance of the changes that have been made in England and Wales.

I go back to the central point that I started with. There is far too much hatred in our society. We all accept that and we should all come together to help to tackle it. I urge the Conservatives in particular, notwithstanding Douglas Ross's legitimate questions, to come together in that effort to support the 2021 act and a zero-tolerance approach to hatred in our society.

Douglas Ross: We all have a zero-tolerance approach to hatred in society, but my question— which the First Minister took more than two minutes to try to answer—was whether innocent people should have a police record when they have done nothing wrong. It sounds from Humza Yousaf's answer that he believes that they should.

He said previously that the issue is about monitoring and about gathering data, but what will the value of that data be if, as we now see, individuals can put forward multiple complaints with little or no substance to them and data about those will be stored and recorded in the way that has been the case with Murdo Fraser?

That unacceptable incident is just the tip of the iceberg. The SNP's hate crime act will come into force in just a few days' time and could lead to more such cases. The controversial new law is ripe for abuse. In a letter to this Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee, the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents said that some individuals will

“seek to weaponise the new legislation and associated police investigation.”

Does Humza Yousaf agree with some of the most senior police officers in Scotland, and does he accept that this law could be weaponised?

The First Minister: Douglas Ross says that we all have a zero-tolerance approach to hate crime. However, when one takes money from a racist misogynist and then refuses to give it back, I am not entirely convinced that that is a zero-tolerance approach whatsoever.

On the issue of non-crime hate incidents, their impact and effect, and the purpose of their recording, I refer Douglas Ross to the chief constable, who was very clear at the Scottish Police Authority board meeting last week about the value of the recording of hate incidents. She said that:

“on recording and reporting hate incidents, they can and do give us a sense, initially, of community tensions. So they

are useful to us in terms of engaging with communities, engaging with different groups in communities and being able to understand where there is potential for tensions to be raised.”

There is an understanding of the reasons and rationale why hate incidents are recorded. That is precisely why the Macpherson report recommended them in the first place around 25 years ago.

In relation to the hate crime act, we of course take seriously what is said by the Scottish Police Federation, ASPS and any other representative organisation that represents police officers.

However, it is incumbent on me to say that this act and the new offences in relation to stirring up are hugely important. Those stirring-up offences have existed in relation to racial hatred since 1986. We are simply extending those protections to other marginalised groups.

It is important for Douglas Ross to be honest and tell members in the chamber and the people of Scotland who it is that he thinks are not deserving of those protections, in the same way that I have been protected because of my race since 1986.

Douglas Ross: The problem is that people will not be protected if the police cannot do their job. We have had warnings, week after week, from officers on the front line, the Police Federation and now the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents. The line at the top of its letterhead says:

“representing the operational leaders of the police service in Scotland”.

It is giving as stark a warning as possible to this SNP Government that the act is flawed. It is not going to do what MSPs who supported it wanted it to do. Those warnings are being ignored by Humza Yousaf.

Let us see whether he will also ignore others. Katharina Kasper is the chair of the Scottish Police Authority's complaints and conduct committee. She said that an investigation itself

“can become a punishment which may have a chilling effect on the freedom of expression.”

Humza Yousaf has directed his comments today at me, as Conservative leader, and at the Conservative Party. What does he say to one of his most senior SNP MPs, Joanna Cherry KC? She said:

“for many, the process will be the punishment. Being under police investigation will be stressful, costly, damaging to reputations and could lead to problems in the workplace.”

The police should not be dispatched to people's doors to check their thinking. Does the First

Minister not recognise the chilling effect that his law will have on free speech?

The First Minister: These issues were rehearsed last week, but I emphasise and reiterate to Douglas Ross that explicit protections for freedom of expression and freedom of speech are, of course, in the bill. In fact, there is a triple-lock protection, because, first, there is explicit reference in the bill to freedom of expression. That was a matter of compromise between the Government and members of the Opposition, which was a good example of how we do legislation in this Parliament. There is also, of course, a reasonable person defence in the legislation, and our legislation has to comply with the European convention on human rights and its important articles in relation to freedom of expression.

I have absolute faith in the police's ability to weed out vexatious complaints. Unfortunately, they have to deal with vexatious complaints across a whole range of legal matters and right across the legal landscape. I have absolute faith in the police's ability to address those issues in ways that are appropriate.

I go back to the central point that stirring-up offences are not new. They have existed since 1986—so for most of my entire life—therefore I have absolute confidence in Police Scotland's ability to police new stirring-up offences in ways that are appropriate.

I say again to Douglas Ross that his party, the Conservatives, supported the extension of stirring-up offences for England and Wales at Westminster. If they are okay to protect people in England and Wales, why are they not okay to protect people here in Scotland? If Douglas Ross believes in a zero-tolerance approach, and if he believes that someone who is Jewish, elderly, gay or disabled should be protected from behaviour that is threatening, abusive or intended to stir up hatred, why is he opposing the legislation? From my point of view, it certainly looks as though it is just for the sake of opposition.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Before we move to Mr Ross's next question, I advise the chamber that many members would like the opportunity to put questions to the First Minister today, therefore I would be grateful if we could have more concise questions and responses.

Douglas Ross: Humza Yousaf can see absolutely no flaw in the legislation that he took through the Parliament, despite the overwhelming evidence that we are getting from front-line officers and many others. The hate crime act will come into force on April fool's day, but it is no joke. The

Scottish Conservatives opposed it when it was passed and we still do.

The act is so flawed that, whatever its intentions, it is likely to create more division. Overworked and underresourced police officers will be forced to deal with hundreds of malicious complaints. Humza Yousaf's law could be weaponised against people with opposing views. Police investigations will tarnish the names of innocent people and could silence them. That law is overreach by the Scottish National Party. How long will it take before the hate crime act goes the same way as the legislation on named persons, offensive behaviour at football matches and gender recognition reform and every other flawed Scottish National Party law?

The First Minister: Not only am I proud of the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021; the entire Parliament should be proud of it. Every single political party came together to support that act, except the Scottish Conservatives. Why should members be proud of it? They should be proud of it because it was supported by a number of groups that represent some of the most marginalised people in our communities. The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities stated:

"We ... strongly support both the introduction of this new offence"—

that is, the stirring-up offence—

"and its application across all protected characteristics."

Why is that important? It is important because Lord Bracadale, who led the independent review that helped us to develop the hate crime act, said:

"Stirring up of hatred may lead to violence or public disorder. It may incite people to commit offences such as assault".

He called such conduct "morally wrong", and he was absolutely right to do so.

The Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 contains provisions that protect people's right to freedom of expression. However, it also ensures that Scotland, the Parliament and this country send a message to people who are often the targets of hatred that we truly have a zero-tolerance approach. That is something that I am very proud of indeed.

Scottish Government Leadership

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Our country faces serious challenges that demand serious leadership. However, in the past year, we have had a Government led by Humza Yousaf with no vision, no strategy and no plan. Those are not my words but those of many people in his own party and leading figures across the country. On the two biggest issues that our country faces, Audit Scotland has said that the First Minister's

Government has no vision for the national health service and lacks political leadership on the economy. In the midst of a housing crisis, Shelter Scotland has said that the First Minister has “no credibility”. As our country grapples with a climate crisis, the Climate Change Committee says that the Government has “no comprehensive strategy” and no credible plan. Does the First Minister agree with the verdict of the experts that this is a Government with no strategy, no vision and no plan?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I tend to believe in the verdict of the Scottish people, who, time and again, have trusted the Scottish National Party to be the Government of Scotland and have rejected Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour. Anas Sarwar, who is famed for his hubris, is already putting up the bunting and telling the people of Scotland that their votes have been taken for granted, whereas the Scottish Government and the party that I lead will never, ever take the people of Scotland for granted in any election.

I say to Anas Sarwar that, on some of the issues that he has mentioned—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Opposition members do not want to hear the record of this Government. Let me tell them about that record.

We have record investment of more than £19.5 billion in the national health service, and statistics this week show that we have record numbers of junior doctors joining the NHS. There are record levels of staffing in the NHS under this Government. We are making improvements to help our NHS through recovery. How? By investing in our NHS staff to the point where they are the best-paid staff anywhere in the UK—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: What is markedly different in Scotland, compared to Conservative-run England or Labour-run Wales, is that, in Scotland, we have not lost a single day of NHS activity to strike action.

Anas Sarwar: There are record levels of denial and bluster from the First Minister. There is no vision, no strategy and no plan—that is failing on the basics of Government.

That incompetence has consequences. In health, NHS waiting lists have gone up in the past year, with tens of thousands more people being added. On the economy, there has been a complete failure to deliver growth. Businesses are struggling and are cancelling investment. In justice, plans to let crimes go uninvestigated are

being green-lighted and, across the country, police stations are closing. In education, standards are falling, violence is rising and teacher numbers are being cut. In housing, there is a cut of £190 million when, tonight, nearly 10,000 children will go to sleep without a home to call their own.

This is the First Minister’s record after just a year in the job. How can Scotland afford another two years of this?

The First Minister: My record in the past year is that an estimated 100,000 children are being lifted out of poverty in Scotland. A record number of junior doctors are joining the NHS in Scotland and we have the best-paid NHS staff anywhere in the UK. My record is that not a single day of NHS activity has been lost to strike action, which is very different from Labour-run Wales, where, this week, junior doctors have once again been forced to go on strike.

On the key economic indicators under this Government, gross domestic product per head has increased in Scotland at a greater rate than in the UK. Productivity has increased at a greater rate per head in comparison with the rest of the UK. Just last month, statistics showed that we have greater private sector employment growth than there is in any other nation or region of the UK.

What is Anas Sarwar’s record? The only consistency over the past year is that he is completely inconsistent. He has U-turned, dumped every single principle or policy and fallen into line behind Keir Starmer.

Anas Sarwar: Even SNP members are feeling sorry for the First Minister.

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: He does not seem to want to listen to me or to experts or business leaders across Scotland, but maybe he will listen to his own side. In just a year of his leadership, there have been three defections, nine SNP members of Parliament have abandoned ship, and his own deputy leader has said that SNP MPs might not turn up to work. He has been called authoritarian by one of his longest-serving MSPs, has been accused of lacking vision by Kate Forbes, and has been called

“a commentator ... and not a leader”

by Alex Neil, while his general election strategy has been trashed by Pete Wishart, his party’s longest-serving MP. In one short year, Humza Yousaf has lost every electoral test that he has been set. Is he worried that the people of Scotland, like many people sitting behind him,

believe that Alex Neil is right and that the strategy is “mince”?

The First Minister: There is another display of Anas Sarwar’s famed arrogance and hubris in the chamber, taking the people of Scotland for granted. He talks about vision—[*Interruption.*]—but he is getting support from the Conservatives, which tells you everything you need to know—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, if you might sit.

Colleagues, let us ensure that we can hear one another.

The First Minister: When it comes to vision, let me remind Anas Sarwar that it was just last week that his colleagues in UK Labour were praising Margaret Thatcher for her vision. I can stand here and say that, in the year that I have been First Minister, I have stood by my values and my principles.

Those values and principles will see an estimated 100,000 children lifted out of poverty. Those values will see record investment in our NHS and record numbers of junior doctors joining it. They have seen the implementation of a fully funded council tax freeze, despite Labour’s best efforts to thwart it. Those values have seen private sector employment grow in Scotland more than in any other UK nation.

As I have said, the only consistency that Anas Sarwar has is his inconsistency—his U-turning and dumping of policies, from the two-child limit to the lifting of the cap on bankers’ bonuses. Most shamefully, there is the latest betrayal of Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI. Anas Sarwar promised to campaign for the WASPI women, but he has now turned his back on them. That is unforgivable. The WASPI women will not forget and they will not forgive.

Artificial Pitches (Infill)

3. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government plans to take following the publication of the University of Stirling study highlighting the reported risk of crumb rubber infill on artificial pitches. (S6F-02979)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Local sport and leisure facilities, including artificial grass pitches, are vital in supporting the physical and mental health of the nation. We will, of course, give full consideration to the new research in that area, and we are supportive of efforts to examine evidence that has been commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the wider impacts of microplastics. That report, which is expected early next year, will be

material in helping to shape regulation that we will take forward in that area.

One factor that will also help to shape our future action is the work of the European Union to phase out the use of rubber crumb in 2031. Sportscotland is also working with others to explore alternative artificial pitch systems and more suitable infill products to replace the spread of microplastics in the environment.

Stephen Kerr: It is important to say that we are not talking about all artificial playing surfaces. For example, there is an excellent new artificial pitch at Falkirk stadium, which was installed after the United Kingdom Government, working with the Scottish Football Association, provided funding through the levelling up fund. We are talking about one particular type of artificial pitch that uses artificial turf crumb rubber infill from shredded end-of-life vehicle tyres. That is terrible for microplastics and, as is highlighted in the University of Stirling report, it is potentially bad for health.

The obvious question is: do we know exactly how many such pitches there are and, indeed, where they are? Will the First Minister commit the Scottish Government to co-ordinating and working with local authorities to determine the state of artificial pitches across Scotland and to publishing the results of that?

The First Minister: I will seriously consider Stephen Kerr’s suggestion, and we will look to see whether that is a worthwhile endeavour, given the recent research that he has indicated.

I go back to my response to Stephen Kerr’s opening question. We are very supportive of the efforts to examine the evidence, and work is being undertaken by DEFRA on the wider impacts of microplastics. I understand that sportscotland is also working with other home nation sports associations to explore what alternative artificial pitch systems are more sustainable in the longer term. That work is on-going.

I am happy to ensure that the appropriate minister writes to Stephen Kerr with the details of the work that is already being undertaken, even while we are waiting for that research. However, we are supportive of the research to understand the impacts of crumb rubber infill and we are getting a better understanding of its use across Scotland.

XL Bully-type Dogs (Definition)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest as convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

To ask the First Minister, further to the regulations relating to XL bully-type dogs coming into force, to whom a dog owner can apply for advice on whether their dog fits the conformation of the XL bully-type, in light of reports that a substantial number of dog owners in England are now applying to deregister their dogs having established retrospectively that their pet does not conform to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs definition of an XL bully-type dog. (S6F-02987)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government's website provides the definition used for an XL bully dog. It also provides a guide for owners to check whether their dog falls within the definition of an XL bully, if they are not sure, and whether they need to apply for an exemption certificate by the end of July. The Minister for Victims and Community Safety has written to all MSPs to provide further information about the exemption scheme, which opens on Monday 1 April and goes all the way to 31 July.

Christine Grahame: In England and Wales, 55,000 applications for registration have been made and 300 healthy and well-behaved dogs have been put down as a result of knee-jerk UK legislation, following horrendous, but very few, fatal dog attacks that were not even wholly attributable to an XL bully-type dog.

There is, as yet, no UK guidance on how to deregister. The pet owner decides whether their pet conforms to the DEFRA definition—20 inches in height for a dog, and 19 inches for a bitch—to be registered. If the animal does not conform to that, the owner need not check the other confirmation characteristics.

I respectfully suggest that the Scottish Government provide clear guidance to the public at large, in a publicity scheme, on the definition, and on deregistration, given that we are stuck—to be frank—with this wholly unnecessary and unjust legislation.

The First Minister: I note Christine Grahame's criticisms of the way in which the UK Government introduced the legislation. I know that she also has concerns about the Scottish Government action in this regard, but she has nonetheless been constructive in her challenge, and I welcome her approach.

On her ask for the Scottish Government to be crystal clear about the guidance and to look at some kind of publicity campaign, I will absolutely take that away and give it weighty consideration. I know that the member is passionate about the issue. As she recognises, we are seeking to close a loophole that has been created by the UK Government legislation; it is, therefore, important

that the definition of an XL bully dog is consistent across the UK.

On the deregistering and exemption process, we are, again, looking to have a consistent approach across the UK, and we are in discussions with the UK Government on that. Nonetheless, I will take away what Christine Grahame has said, and her suggestion for crystal-clear guidance and any potential publicity campaign that we can undertake around that.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Much of the current confusion could have been avoided if Scotland had kept pace with other parts of the UK on regulations of this nature. Yesterday, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety reiterated the Scottish Government's position that it's concern is about deed, not breed.

However, the legislation is, by its very nature, breed specific. Over a number of weeks, we have seen attacks on people; dogs have been killed; armed police have had to restrain this type of dog; and there have been a series of very serious incidents, some of which have been fatal to humans and to other pets. The problem is clear.

How can the Government maintain its current position that it is about deed, not breed? More importantly, what will the Government do to enforce the new regulations and to ensure that there is clarity for the public?

The First Minister: Jamie Greene makes the point that we did not keep pace with the United Kingdom legislation—well, we were not informed about the UK legislation. The first that we were ever told about it was via the BBC News website, on 15 September, as it was being reported. It was two weeks later, on 29 September, that the Scottish Government received a letter from the UK Government on the actual issue, but that gave no detail at all of the specific approach and, crucially, no detail of the potential impact on Scotland.

On 14 November, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety wrote to the UK Government to seek clarity on controls on English and Welsh XL bully dogs in terms of selling or gifting dogs in Scotland. On 14 December, a month later, the relevant UK Government minister replied, giving no clarity whatsoever on the issue.

As the member knows, Scotland has a dog control notice regime, which does not exist in England and Wales. I have great confidence in that system. There are currently more than 1,200 active dog control notices, and XL bully dogs represent 2 per cent of the DCNs that are in force.

I stand by the position of deed, not breed. The decision to depart from that approach is not one that we have taken lightly at all; we have had to respond to circumstances in other parts of the UK.

What would make our lives materially much easier, and enable us to be more consistent in our approach, would be if the UK Government were not to simply announce, without telling us, legislation that could have an impact in Scotland, but actually engaged with us beforehand.

Glasgow School of Art (Restoration)

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to expedite the restoration of the Glasgow School of Art, in light of it being nearly a decade since the first fire. (S6F-02995)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government recognises the cultural and historical significance of the Mackintosh building; its world-renowned status; and the importance of the Mack to the Glasgow School of Art, to the city of Glasgow and to Scotland as a whole.

We have welcomed the Glasgow School of Art's plan for a faithful reinstatement of the Mackintosh building. The building is owned by the Glasgow School of Art, which has responsibility for its own strategic and operational decision making. The Glasgow School of Art's ambition to rebuild the Mack and eventually reopen it as a graduate school for the benefit of staff, students, the local community and the city will, I am sure, be welcomed right across the chamber.

Paul Sweeney: The Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building is indeed one of the world's most revered art nouveau buildings. It is an intrinsic part of Glasgow's identity, yet the shell of the building has been left languishing for 10 years after the devastating second fire of June 2018, as chronicled by *The Herald* newspaper this week.

As the French President did with Notre-Dame, will the First Minister personally intervene to expedite the restoration of the Glasgow School of Art by following international best practice? Will he establish a new statutory delivery authority with specific responsibility for developing and delivering the restoration project, in concert with the Glasgow School of Art, by 2030?

The First Minister: I recognise the good work that Paul Sweeney does as a trustee of Glasgow City Heritage Trust. I know that he has a genuine interest, as we all do, in seeing the building restored for the benefit of the city and the country as a whole. There are differences between the Mack building and Notre-Dame cathedral; the cathedral is owned by the French Government, while the Mack is owned by the Glasgow School of Art.

It is absolutely right for Paul Sweeney and other members to question the length of time that the restoration is taking. As part of the context, it would be fair to say that, for a number of years,

the building was under the control of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as it conducted its investigation into the fire, which took a number of years because of the complexities. The Glasgow School of Art continues to have responsibility for the Mack. I do not think that the Scottish Government commandeering the building is the right approach.

In its outline business case, the Glasgow School of Art has explained that it expects funding for the Mackintosh building to come from a range of sources, such as fire insurance proceeds, donations and pledges, capital receipts and reserves. It has not made a request to the Government at this stage, but we will look to ensure that we can support the Glasgow School of Art in the restoration of the Mack, because it is of critical importance. After First Minister's questions, I will ensure that we continue to reach out to the Glasgow School of Art to see what further support we can provide.

New Deal for Tenants

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on what action the Scottish Government is taking to deliver the new deal for tenants. (S6F-02974)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am delighted that, on Tuesday this week, the Housing (Scotland) Bill was introduced to the Parliament, marking a huge milestone in our commitment to deliver the new deal for tenants, of which we are extremely proud. The bill creates new tenants' rights, introduces powers for longer-term private sector rent controls and new duties that are aimed at the prevention of homelessness. A fairer, well-regulated private rented sector is in the interests of both tenants and responsible landlords. Our proposals will help to improve affordability for tenants in the private rented sector, while recognising the importance of landlords investing in the quality of their properties.

Maggie Chapman: The publication of the housing bill is an important step in delivering the new deal for tenants. It includes key policies that the Scottish Greens consider vital, such as protections against evictions, a framework for long-term rent controls and new rights for tenants to have pets and decorate their homes. I know that many want it to go further, but vested interests say that it is already too radical. How has the Scottish Government sought to make those proposals robust against legal challenge? Will the First Minister commit to ensuring that the voices of tenants are heard as loudly as those of property investors?

The First Minister: I am very proud of the Housing (Scotland) Bill and the additional

protections that we are introducing for tenants. It is important to recognise that the vast majority of landlords are responsible and will undoubtedly have a good relationship with their tenants.

I am grateful for everybody's engagement—tenants, landlords, the private rented sector, investors and others—over the past two years, since we first consulted on the new deal for tenants. We will continue to listen to the voices of tenants, as we have done throughout. Tenants having clear rights, which they know how to exercise and feel empowered to use, is not just good for tenants but, as I have mentioned, is good for landlords and, I suggest, good for letting agents, too.

I recognise that there are strong feelings about some of the measures that are being proposed in the bill. However, the Government believes that the rented sector reform measures continue to safeguard the reasonable and proportionate use of landlords' property for rental purposes, seeking to deliver a fair balance between protection for tenants, which we all accept, agree on and support, and the rights of landlords. I hope that we can all agree that a fairer, well-regulated rented sector is good for both tenants and responsible landlords.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Yesterday, the national tenants union, Living Rent, described the Housing (Scotland) Bill as a huge step forward for tenants. Will the First Minister outline how the new legislation will help to prevent homelessness and build on Scotland's already strong housing legislation?

The First Minister: Scotland already has the strongest rights in the United Kingdom for people who are homeless, but we know that we can do more. We want to build on that record—hence, the legislation that has been introduced. The bill brings a renewed focus on prevention, so that households do not have to go through the trauma and disruption of homelessness in the first place. Relevant bodies, such as health boards, will be required to ask about and act on a person's housing situation, and local authorities will be required to act earlier to prevent homelessness.

Matt Downie, the chief executive of Crisis, has "strongly welcomed" the bill, saying that the plans hold the potential to create a truly world-leading homelessness system. Our job, of course, is to ensure that that potential translates into reality. We are committed to working closely with stakeholders to ensure that the guidance and training to support the new prevention duties will be fit for purpose.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary

questions. Let us keep the questions and the responses concise.

People with Learning Difficulties and Complex Needs (Care)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Two years ago, in the "Coming Home" report, ministers pledged that, by March 2024, we would see real change, with out-of-area residential placements and inappropriate hospital stays for young people ending, and that we would see a proper care package put in place for families, with families and individuals having that choice taken into account. However, the Government has failed to deliver that, so I ask the First Minister when he will update Parliament on that promise, which was made to some of the most vulnerable people in our country and their families.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I recognise that Miles Briggs has a long-standing interest in the issue. He has raised it many times and I remember him raising it with me in previous ministerial guises. I say to him that we take the issue incredibly seriously. I will look at the latest progress in relation to the update that we have promised, but we want to make sure that we are doing it right in terms of providing proper care packages and that those who are most vulnerable—as Miles Briggs rightly describes them—are given the appropriate care. I will ensure that he is given a written update after First Minister's question time.

South Lanarkshire Care Homes (Closure)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): This week, South Lanarkshire health and social care partnership voted to close two care homes, including McClymont House in Lanark, to help to plug a £33 million funding shortfall. The closures will save just £600,000 next year, but they are devastating for residents—older, vulnerable people who now face being kicked out of their homes. The partnership, which includes councillors in the First Minister's party, has written to the Scottish Government with a last-minute appeal for it to provide additional support to save those care homes. Will the First Minister do the right thing? Will he listen to families whose loved ones will soon lose their homes? Will he intervene and save McClymont House and Dewar House care homes?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): On the closure of Dewar House and McClymont House in South Lanarkshire, nobody wants to see the closure of good-quality care homes. The context of the issue is that we have increased the local government settlement for 2024-25, and we have met our ambition to increase social care spend by 25 per cent two years earlier than we said we

would. Nobody wants to see the closure of good-quality care homes, but we know that care homes can close for a number of reasons. That is why we are committed to the national care service, which will provide national, consistent and high-quality social care support.

It is disappointing that South Lanarkshire Council, which is run by Colin Smyth's party, is choosing to disinvest. We will seek assurances that alternative arrangements are being put in place to support the people of South Lanarkshire. I go back to the point that we are giving a real-terms increase to local government in the budget for 2024-25.

Valve Components Ltd (Redundancies)

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): The First Minister may be aware that Glenalmond Group Ltd went into administration earlier this month. That led to almost 100 people being made redundant with no notice, including 94 people at Valve Components Ltd in East Kilbride. Will the First Minister outline what support has been, or can be, provided to the workers there, and will he also talk about his vision for the future of manufacturing in Scotland? It is a proud part of our history and a sector with a key role to play in our future.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am very concerned to hear that Valve Components Ltd, which is part of the Glenalmond Group, has entered administration, with 95 immediate job losses. Of course, my immediate thoughts are with the affected employees and their families at such a difficult time. Scottish Enterprise has been liaising with the administrators and has alerted them to a number of businesses in the East Kilbride area that have, at this time, expressed an interest in recruiting some of the impacted staff.

In addition to partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—information being provided to employees, a PACE event was held last week with a view to minimising the time that individuals who are affected by redundancy are out of work.

On the broader vision, I am happy for the appropriate cabinet secretary to write to Collette Stevenson with details, but we are investing in the manufacturing sector's future—notably £75 million in the flagship building of the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, which I was proud to open last June.

Aye Write Book Festival (Funding)

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): The Aye Write book festival, which has been running in Glasgow for nearly 20 years, has been cancelled this year, just weeks before it was due to return, after its funding bid was rejected by Creative Scotland.

That comes just weeks after it was revealed that the quango had initially awarded £85,000 for an explicit film. Can the First Minister clarify Creative Scotland's prioritisation process in cultural funding decisions? What steps is the Scottish Government taking to safeguard the diversity and vibrancy of Glasgow's cultural landscape?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Aye Write is a fantastic festival. Anybody who has had the pleasure of attending its events knows the value that it brings, not just to the city but, I suggest, to the country as a whole.

Annie Wells will be aware that those decisions are for Creative Scotland to make, independently of Scottish Government ministers. Nonetheless, having been alerted to the news, I will look at what support the Scottish Government could provide, because Annie Wells is right—Aye Write is a fantastic festival, and I would say that it is something of a cultural icon and an institution within our festival and cultural landscape. I will examine the issue and I will be happy to keep the member updated.

Salmon Exports (Impact of Brexit)

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): How does the First Minister respond to reports today that Brexit has cost Scotland up to £100 million a year in salmon exports? Companies have faced increased costs due to the hard Brexit that the Tories forced on Scotland, and Labour, too, has now reportedly rowed back on its pledge to renegotiate the United Kingdom's Brexit deal. Does the First Minister agree that, in continuing to endorse Brexit, both the Tories and Labour are showing little regard for that vital industry?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I could not agree more. There is no doubt—and almost all of the independent research shows—that Brexit has been an unmitigated, complete and utter disaster for our economy. The Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast suggests that the UK economy will reduce by 4 per cent because of the impacts of Brexit.

I expect the Conservatives, who are hard Brexiteers, to continue down that disastrous path, but I cannot understand why Labour is falling in behind the Conservatives and supporting a hard Brexit. Scotland's food and drink sector has borne the brunt of Brexit, which has disrupted supply chains, created new barriers to trade and driven up food prices. *[Interruption.]* Anas Sarwar and Jackie Baillie are laughing at the damage that has been done to the food and drink sector. It is no laughing matter, because it is crystal clear that there is a Westminster consensus in favour of Brexit, no matter what the cost to Scotland is. The only way to stop that damage and rejoin the

European Union is for Scotland to become an independent nation.

**National Union of Journalists
(Industrial Action)**

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good journalism is crucial to a healthy democracy. No member in the chamber would claim to relish being confronted with a microphone held by the likes of Bernard Ponsonby. Over the past 34 years, he has shortened the career of many politicians, but we all recognise the crucial job that he has done and that his excellent colleagues across our media continue to do.

However, normal service will be disrupted today, as National Union of Journalists members at STV take strike action for the first time in more than 20 years. I understand that, counter to perceptions, half of the newsroom staff are paid less than a teacher's starting salary. Despite STV posting £20 million of profits, it is the only broadcaster that is not passing on to all of its workers a percentage pay increase that meets inflation. In the context of its fair work responsibilities, what representations has the Government made to STV on the matter, in order to encourage meaningful negotiations, a fair deal for the journalists and an end to the dispute?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will start where Neil Bibby, rightly, started, by praising and paying tribute to Bernard Ponsonby and his long-standing career of more than 30 years in journalism. I wish him well in his retirement, and I am grateful that I no longer have to be on the other end of a tough interview by him.

Although it is not for the Scottish Government to directly intervene in the dispute, I absolutely urge STV, as Neil Bibby has asked me to do, to get around the table with the employees and their union to try to ensure that a satisfactory outcome can be reached. Just yesterday, I was speaking to some STV journalists—again, on the other end of an interview—and I was told that one of the reasons for concern is the disparity between how ITV is treating its employees and how STV is doing so.

It is our long-standing position that a progressive approach to industrial relations, along with stronger protections for workers and fair pay, is at the very heart of a more successful society. We will continue to support trade unions across a variety of sectors, and we encourage STV in this instance to immediately get back around the table in order to get a fair pay settlement for STV employees including, crucially, journalists.

VisitScotland Information Centres

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Yesterday's news that VisitScotland plans to close its iCentre network across the country by 2026 and pursue a digital-first strategy has come as a shock in the northern isles, which rely on tourism. Does the First Minister share the view of some in the tourism sector that that is a retrograde step, and is he able to indicate whether any impact assessment has been conducted on island communities that are affected by VisitScotland's decision?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is important for VisitScotland to continue its engagement with the tourism sector, which it has done in relation to the decision. VisitScotland's research shows that 99 per cent of visitors now book accommodation in advance of travelling, and that 67 per cent of global travellers book their whole itinerary in advance of arriving at their destination by using online tools, social media or travel intermediaries.

The number of visitors using iCentres has dropped significantly over several years, particularly after Covid. The decrease from 2019 to 2023 ranges from 16 per cent to 57 per cent across 25 locations. Notwithstanding that, Beatrice Wishart's points are important, and I expect VisitScotland to continue to engage in what is an important sector for Scotland—the tourism industry—which is worth so much to us and which opens Scotland up to the rest of the world.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Crystal FM Radio

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask those who are leaving the chamber to please do so quickly and quietly. The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12187, in the name of Christine Grahame, on congratulating Crystal FM Penicuik on being declared the best community radio broadcaster at the *SME News* Scottish enterprise awards. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the achievements of the community radio station, Crystal FM (107.4 FM), which is based in Penicuik and has won the Best Community Radio Broadcaster award at the *SME News* Scottish Enterprise Awards for the second year running; notes that the radio station, which has been operating for 11 years, is run by volunteers, and broadcasts over south Midlothian, into Edinburgh and the Lothians, as well as to listeners all over the world via its internet broadcast; further notes that the radio station has over 50 presenters and information providers who are involved in its non-stop 24/7 output; believes that such radio stations are an important part of local communities, and thanks all involved for their continuing efforts.

12:49

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak—and not for the first time—on the importance of community radio. The debate focuses on Crystal FM, which is located in Penicuik, in my constituency, and particularly on the success of the station in winning the best community broadcaster award for the second time.

I visited the studio recently, and very professional it is, too. I met Colin McCall, the anchorman, who has devoted his time to the good of Penicuik over decades. He first campaigned with the station to save its Jackson Street facilities years ago. Unfortunately, that was a battle lost, but you cannot keep a good man down. We had a good, long chat about all that the station does and some of its issues, which I will come to, as well as coming to more about Colin.

The station was launched on 1 December 2013. It is run by volunteers and broadcasts over south Midlothian, Edinburgh and the Lothians, as well as to listeners all over the world via the internet. With more than 50 presenters and information providers involved, it has non-stop, 24/7 output and is an important part of the community, but it depends on

donations and subscriptions. Simply to survive, it has to raise £12,000 annually.

The station has overcome setbacks over the years—flooded studios, a move to temporary accommodation for a period of six months and, when Covid appeared, a requirement to move to other premises to ensure that the studios were Covid compliant. As a result, it went from its temporary accommodation to a permanent home in the Eastfield business centre in Penicuik.

The radio service has been maintained, which means that youngsters from Peni high, Beeslack community high school, and Peebles and Lasswade high schools can continue to participate in the service, gaining hands-on experience in all aspects of broadcasting, thereby developing skills, confidence and self-esteem.

Those committed volunteers ensure the smooth running and scheduling of programmes. They do outreach work with individuals who are housebound and encourage others to visit the studios to participate in discussion, learn new skills and allow spells away from their home isolation. Older members of the community enjoy the autonomy in the creation of their own shows and the community engagement that is involved, thus benefiting from the feel-good factor and having their mental health enhanced. Individuals with special needs are catered for, including two with physical handicaps, an individual who is autistic and one who suffers from Asperger's syndrome.

Funding is a constant worry, but the station is supported by 12 businesses that are classified as "proud supporters" of Crystal FM and numerous individuals who pledge support with regular and frequent financial pledges. Many other donations are received from others from time to time, and the Crystal FM radio club provides financial support via membership fees.

However, outlays are substantial. Over a 10-year period, Ofcom receives £6,000 and wireless telegraphy licensing costs £2,500. Music licensing fees to PPL, PRS for Music and the Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society—MCPS—are £30,000. VAT payments in excess of £25,000 are made over 10 years. That is a particularly cruel levy on the local service, which is not a business and therefore cannot apply to be VAT registered, because it does not have the income level. Powers over VAT are reserved to Westminster, but I hope that, at some point, something can be done for such organisations that have VAT burdens to carry.

Crystal FM has a really good website, which has had

"well over 110,000 hits".

The station

“now has over 50 presenters and information providers involved in the 24-hour-a-day, seven days a week, output”.

Colin McCall, is the station’s co-ordinator and a former primary school teacher. He is now in his 80th year, but, like me, he is flourishing. He founded the station,

“which was shortlisted for a Community Award in last year’s Midlothian and East Lothian Chamber of Commerce Awards, with a handful of other enthusiasts who donated £100 each”.

Colin has said:

“Crystal FM came to fruition because Black Diamond”—

in Newtongrange—

“was not receivable over here in Penicuik. I forwarded an application of Ofcom to extend the area to Penicuik and they refused.

They did, however, say they would look favourably on a Penicuik application. Six or seven of us put £100 on the table and 18 months later Crystal FM came about. This is the start of our 11th year and we have a great team of volunteers who have made that possible.”

The station’s reach is supposed to be six miles from the studio in Eastfield business centre, on Eastfield Farm Road in Penicuik. However, as Colin says,

“How do you stop a radio signal? It is variable because you can go a very short distance and the signal is lost or you can go a long distance and pick up the signal. For example, I’ve picked up the signal from the golf course car park in Kirkcaldy”—

I do not know what he was doing there—

“and it is excellent quality in the car, but our signal also reaches Ratho near Edinburgh as it must go through a gap in the Pentland Hills.”

Is that not intriguing? He continues:

“We now stream out online and it is interesting to note that since we moved to our new studio more than two years ago we have now had over 100,000 hits on our website. Looking further afield, on the internet our broadcasts are worldwide and our regular top four online are the UK, USA, Europe and India. We also have listeners in Australia. I don’t really know why we have listeners in India but it may possibly be a link to the people who live here and it allows their relatives to listen, but India has always figured in the top three or four.”

That is a wee exercise for somebody: find out why India listens to Crystal FM. Good stuff, Colin.

I commend all those who work at Crystal FM, the volunteers, the donors and the listeners, who make it all worth while. I wish them many more decades ahead.

12:56

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing today’s debate. I, too, pay tribute to Crystal FM,

which is based in her constituency, for winning the best community radio broadcaster award.

Community radio stations provide a voice for our local communities. In my speech, I want to highlight and celebrate one of the UK’s 300 licensed community radio stations, CamGlen Radio, which is based in my constituency. As the name suggests, CamGlen Radio primarily serves the areas of Cambuslang and Rutherglen, in my constituency, as well as surrounding localities. It broadcasts on 107.9 FM locally and worldwide online.

As part of the brilliant local third sector organisation Healthy n Happy community development trust, CamGlen Radio has broadcast since 2007 and became a full-time service in 2015. As it says on its website, the station’s purpose is to

“address inequality and improve wellbeing.”

It does that through supporting local people to be active and involved by providing media training and skill building as a pathway to employment and by using radio to connect people and communities.

On the latter point, community radio plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and connection among its listeners. At a time when radio is dominated by large media conglomerates, which are more focused on regional, national or global news, community radio stations very often tell stories of local significance that would not be picked up elsewhere.

CamGlen Radio offers a variety of programming, including music spanning different genres; talk shows covering local news, history and events; and speciality programmes catering for specific interests in the community.

Not only that, but the radio station provides local people with vital opportunities and experiences. CamGlen Radio helps its volunteers to develop their radio skills, covering all aspects of radio operations from planning and presenting shows through to editing, production and broadcast support. Whether it is in teaching people how to host a radio show, produce compelling stories or operate technical equipment, community radio stations play a vital role in nurturing the next generation of broadcasters and journalists in our communities, and they provide local people with transferable skills to take into whatever career path they choose.

Since starting, CamGlen Radio has given the opportunity to local primary and secondary schools to take over the airways and produce their own shows. Some of the schools in my constituency that have made content on CamGlen Radio over the years include Newton Farm, James

Aiton, St Bride's, Hallside, Burgh, Bankhead, Calderwood, Cairns, St Mark's and St Anthony's primary schools, as well as Rutherglen, Cathkin and Trinity high schools. Two of my sons took great pride and pleasure in presenting shows with their classmates from St Columbkille's primary school some years ago.

Community radio stations, like local newspapers, connect people to stories in a way that national media cannot. If the issues at hand are not local to them, people might feel that articles and stories are abstract and they might feel disconnected from them. Community radio stations such as CamGlen Radio ground stories in the heart of the communities that they serve.

One of my constituents, Dr Janice Ross, wrote her doctoral thesis on community radio and was the first person in the country to do so. Janice is currently interviewing local refugee women she has met and befriended through her local volunteering work, to learn more about their experiences, their journeys to these shores and how they have adapted to life in Scotland.

That series of programmes, which will provide a unique personal, social and political history archive, will be broadcast on the radio station in the coming months. Such highlighting and amplification of diverse local voices is what makes CamGlen Radio what it is, and it explains why community radio is much loved across Scotland.

I have had the pleasure of being on CamGlen Radio a couple of times over the years, the first of which was when I was interviewed by the late Bob Rowatt just before the 2016 election. As someone who had hosted many local political hustings that CamGlen broadcast, Bob was Rutherglen and Cambuslang's answer to Jeremy Paxman. He was a very astute interviewer, who kept many local candidates on their toes.

Like so many other community radio stations, in promoting informed decision making among voters and holding us politicians to account, CamGlen Radio plays a vital role in our democratic process.

I again thank Christine Grahame for securing today's debate. I am sure that CamGlen Radio will give Crystal FM a run for its money at next year's awards ceremony.

13:01

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I echo Clare Haughey's thanks to Christine Grahame for securing this important debate. As Ms Grahame did, I offer my whole-hearted congratulations to all the volunteers at Crystal FM on winning—for the second year running—the best community radio broadcaster award at the SME News Scottish enterprise awards. I congratulate them on the

energy that they bring to their work and Christine Grahame on the energy that she has brought to today's debate.

The award recognises the innovation, excellence and dedication that the station's volunteers bring to providing the best and most outstanding services to clients and customers. It is crystal clear that Crystal FM truly represents the very best of community radio.

As Christine Grahame said, for the past 11 years, the station has provided a service for the people of Penicuik, the surrounding area and—thanks to Alexa—the world. Given that I have friends and family in India, I will try to find out why so many people are tuning in from there.

As the licensee of Crystal FM, Penicuik Community Education Association ensures that that important community broadcaster continues to provide a service that is principally for the local area. I am alert to the funding concerns that Christine Grahame raised, and I hope that the cabinet secretary—regardless of how tight the creative budget in Scotland is—will see what he can do to support the directors and volunteers who deliver community radio services across Scotland.

Christine Grahame: I do not know whether there is a solution to this problem, but does Craig Hoy agree that it is rather tough that Crystal FM has to pay substantial amounts in VAT and that, because it is not an income-generating business, it cannot even apply to be VAT registered? Given Mr Hoy's strong communications with his Westminster colleagues, might he be able to pursue that issue?

Craig Hoy: I absolutely will. I have already suggested to the Treasury that it should cut VAT for our hard-pressed hospitality businesses in Scotland, and I will be happy to add community radio services to that request.

Obviously, the Crystal FM service benefits hugely from the support of local businesses, patrons, listeners, friends and volunteers. It is their unwavering assistance and commitment that ensures that the station can continue to serve members of the local community with a broadcasting service that, as Christine Grahame said, provides hands-on training, inclusion, lifelong learning and information. As someone who went to Lasswade high, it was good to hear that those who have followed in my footsteps at that venerable institution are also getting access to radio services.

As well as covering local issues, Crystal FM raises awareness of national and global events. For people who are held up at Sheriffhall roundabout on their way to work, as many of us are, it is good to hear that Colin McCall will keep them updated on how long they might be held up

there. As Christine Grahame said, Colin, who is now in his 80th year, is the former primary school teacher who founded the station. I express our gratitude to him, because we know that there needs to be someone at the centre of such community initiatives to drive them forward.

For those who like rock and metal, “Snoddy”—Mark Snodgrass—broadcasts a show at 10 pm on Wednesday nights that will keep them rocking long after my bedtime. For those who prefer to listen to folk music, Johnny Ward presents “Pentland Folk” on Thursday and Saturday afternoons.

I am a huge fan of community and local radio, not least because it was in community and local radio that I cut my teeth journalistically. I took to the microphone for the first time on the University of Edinburgh’s Student FM, on which I presented a late-night cooking programme without any supporting materials, narrating how to make a luxury omelette on a student budget. I did not have even a spoon or stove in the studio, but my mother still believed that I had managed to rustle up a late-night lobster omelette. I doubt that any listeners tried to make it—in fact, I doubt that there were many listeners at all—but that was a good place to make early journalistic mistakes.

I had more luck at Radio Forth, where I learned at the knee of the great David Johnston, the then news editor, or “Dial David” as he was known. When I was working on his Sunday call-in show, I used to marvel when “Tam from Linlithgow” would religiously dial in and the unmistakable voice of Tam Dalyell would then boom out to our listeners. David is no longer on our radios, but it is nice to see him frequently in East Lothian as a trustee and honorary flag master of the saltire flag heritage centre in Athelstaneford.

Local and community radio stations have been an important part of our communities and will continue to be so even in the digital age. For example, in East Lothian, Radio Saltire and East Coast FM broadcast to residents. A quick glance at the Crystal FM website and Facebook page confirms the important role that the radio station has in Penicuik and further afield in promoting local events and upcoming shows and reporting the wins, draws and occasional losses of local football, rugby and cricket teams.

I again congratulate all at Crystal FM for the important work that they do in sharing news and entertaining listeners. The award is well deserved, and long may their success continue.

13:06

Foyso! Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Christine Grahame on bringing this motion to the chamber and Crystal FM on winning the award for best community radio broadcaster at

the SME News Scottish enterprise awards for the second year running.

The station came into being when Ofcom refused to extend the signal of another station. It is a true do-it-yourself story to be proud of. With more than 50 presenters and 24/7 programming, it is impressive how Crystal FM has been able to mobilise the community to make the project a success. It is a great achievement, reflecting the dedication of everyone who gives their time to the station.

Community radio stations such as Crystal FM help people of all ages—including my colleague Craig Hoy—to develop new skills, meet new people and increase their confidence. That belief is shared by many Scots, with a Scottish Government review of community radio in 2012 finding that 49 per cent of people said that it was important to have a community radio station in their area.

As members will know, Crystal FM was formed when a handful of volunteers donated £100 each. As most community stations run on the good will and donations of volunteers, they are free from commercial influences. That freedom allows communities to create programming that truly represents them. It also allows for a wide variety of programming, with Crystal FM broadcasting shows containing both reggae and Runrig. In the internet age, the barriers to entry for new stations have never been lower. Independent stations such as Crystal FM should be welcomed, because they give communities the opportunity for self-expression and foster the arts and culture across Scotland.

Community radio is also active in Lothian, which has stations such as EHFM and Black Diamond FM. The Black Diamond FM work experience scheme for high school pupils is an example of how community stations can do great work for their local area. EHFM, which celebrated its fifth anniversary last year, allows local artists to submit music to be played on the station, further developing Edinburgh’s music scene and its stature as a cultural hub.

It is clear that community stations do great work in helping people to develop new skills and in fostering culture across Scotland. I reiterate my congratulations to all who have worked to bring the award to Crystal FM. They have created something very special. I wish them all the best for their future broadcasting, and I look forward to tuning in.

13:10

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I ask members to forgive me—I was not scheduled to speak in the debate, so I am going to subject them

to one of my “I wrote it during First Minister’s questions” speeches. However, I feel that this is a really important debate to participate in, not least because I have a huge personal interest in local and community radio.

I thank Christine Grahame for bringing her motion to the chamber for debate, and I commend Crystal FM for its achievement.

We have heard a little about some of the other community radio stations that are thriving in our communities, despite and in the face of many challenges, so it would be remiss of me not to use the opportunity to plug some of the community radio stations in my region. I know that the cabinet secretary is fully expecting me to do so and I am sure that he will refer to them in his closing comments. I know that he loves Clyde Coast Radio, which operates out of Port Glasgow, because the local MP, Ronnie Cowan, has a resident slot on the station. Alas, the station is yet to ring me, but I am open to doing a show if it wants me to.

It is interesting that, although the technology means that Clyde Coast Radio broadcasts on FM, the fact that it also broadcasts online means that it can reach people across the world. It has listeners in New Zealand, Canada, Spain and France, among other countries. Some of them are members of the diaspora—former Greenock or Inverclyde residents and their relatives who want to know what is going on in the local communities. That emphasises the station’s importance. The local newspaper, the *Greenock Telegraph*, is read by people all over the world and has subscribers around the globe, and the same applies to local radio.

I was surprised to hear that we harbour our own Julia Child in the Parliament, who took to the radio waves to teach people how to cook. Thank goodness people could not see the results—or, indeed, taste the taste—of that effort because of the nature of radio. [*Laughter.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members of the need to treat each other with courtesy and respect.

Jamie Greene: I apologise to Julia Child for the reference.

I want to make some important points about community radio. There are more than 300 community radio stations operating across the UK. Many have tried and failed over the years, for reasons such as have been eloquently illustrated.

My experience takes me right back to being a teenager, when I got involved in local radio. I was heavily involved in hospital radio, which also still thrives, to an extent. Inverclyde Royal hospital radio was my starting point for a career in media

and broadcast. I then did work experience at a number of local radio stations. I remember our first local community radio station, which was Tall Ships FM, in 1999. It was a short-term licence station that operated on the back of a very big and successful local event that attracted tens of thousands of visitors to Greenock. That experience, which involved chasing people with a microphone and sitting in front of a red light and knowing that I had to speak because otherwise there would be silence—which is death in radio—inspired and motivated me to seek more formal education and experience as my career moved on in radio, then into television.

Local radio is a starting point that can inspire young people and show them that it is something that they can do. Anyone, from any background, can sit in front of a microphone and, with the right experience, make a success and a career out of it, and many people do that.

However, the challenges that local radio faces are plenty. A consultation is under way in which Ofcom is looking at new ways of licensing it. There have been various models over the years, some of which have been quite successful. Various grants have been available over the years, but there is never enough money. Local radio often relies on being able to commercialise in any way it can, such as through small-scale local advertising, philanthropy or funding sources including from the National Lottery Community Fund and Postcode Lottery Ltd, which have helpfully funded many stations. I hope that Ofcom will look carefully at how it can make licensing appropriate, easy and accessible, and at how we can make better use of new technologies to reach wider audiences.

It is a very difficult landscape. All local radio has gone through a very difficult time over the past 20 years. The consolidation of networks and the creation of bigger units of private ownership have taken out a lot of local news production; the same is true of local television and local news gathering, which face many common issues.

I hope that both Governments will look at that however they can, whether that is through VAT, grant funding, Ofcom licensing regimes or investing in skills and technology in communities. I want the community station network to thrive and survive, and not to have to face the fierce competition of the well-funded large networks or the public service broadcasters, which seem to have bottomless pits of money with which to produce output and pay their presenters.

All community stations are run by volunteers. We should never forget that. People give up their time to educate their local communities, which rely on local news and on the charitable organisations that are often on them. Of course, they also listen to good music, chat and banter, as we have heard.

Anyone who has ever listened to Sunny Govan Radio in Glasgow will know that the banter is fantastic.

I thank Christine Grahame for this short debate, and I hope that, if we have another such debate in the future, we will have far more community radio stations to praise and talk about.

13:15

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I thank Christine Grahame for bringing the motion to the Parliament, and members from across the chamber—Clare Haughey, Craig Hoy, Foysol Choudhury and Jamie Greene—who have contributed on a subject that is close to my heart, as a former radio broadcaster by profession. I am sure that I speak on behalf of every member in the chamber when I say that I would be grateful if Craig Hoy would share a link to his Edinburgh university radio cookery programme. We would all enjoy listening to that.

I agree with all members that community radio stations play an important part in the social fabric of Scotland. Community radio has an important role in the lives of its listeners. It creates a sense of connection to others in the community, promotes local activity and encourages engagement. Its enduring importance in Scotland can be seen in the growing number of stations. In March 2023, 32 community radio stations were broadcasting in Scotland—that is almost double the number that existed a decade ago. Rightly, many of them have been name-checked in the course of proceedings today.

According to a recent study that was published by the University of Northampton,

“there are high levels of trust amongst listeners ... they ... act upon information”

and

“Significant numbers of listeners have been directly helped in ... employment and health”

and other areas

“thanks to information heard and trusted on local community radio.”

Those small, and usually volunteer-led, organisations provide a vital resource not only for the communities that they serve but for the Scottish music industry by providing a platform for emerging artists. That is why I am delighted to congratulate Crystal FM on its second year running as the best community radio broadcaster at the *SME News* Scottish enterprise awards.

That accolade is hard-earned. The station runs for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and

includes original and locally produced output, with important objectives including facilitating discussion, providing training and strengthening links within the community and—as we have heard—even as far away as Kirkcaldy.

The Scottish Government recognises that culture; stations should respond to the ambition, need and challenges of our communities, and Crystal FM Penicuik has demonstrated that it does just that. Our culture strategy makes it clear that our ambition is for everyone in Scotland to experience culture and the empowering potential that it holds for communities across the country. We can all acknowledge culture's unique power to inspire, enrich and transform not only the lives of individuals but the collective wellbeing of our communities.

The Scottish Government strongly supports broadcasting and the important role of the distinct and essential services that are provided by broadcasters in relation to audiences and the creative sector in Scotland. We engage closely with the media regulator, Ofcom, to ensure that Scottish interests are fully considered. This week, I met Melanie Dawes, who is the chief executive of Ofcom, to discuss its future plans in Scotland. I value Ofcom's initiatives to improve and support community radio, and on ensuring that stations can focus on delivering social gain for their target communities.

I also take the opportunity to encourage people who have an interest to respond to Ofcom's consultation on the key commitments for community radio, which was mentioned by Jamie Greene. As is set out in the “Building a New Scotland” series paper, “Culture in an Independent Scotland”,

“nearly nine in ten of us listen to the radio weekly, for an average of almost 19 hours ... yet broadcasting remains reserved and decision-making on key issues sits with the UK Government.”

With independence, the Scottish Government could build on the strengths of the current broadcasting model and use new powers to develop a broadcasting strategy that better reflects and prioritises the specific needs and interests of Scottish audiences and our creative economy.

Today we are celebrating Crystal FM, station co-ordinator Colin McCall and his great team of more than 50 volunteers. The Scottish Government values the skills, kindness and commitment of our volunteers. We recognise the difference that they make to people's lives, and we appreciate all those who give their time to volunteer and make things better for others. Volunteering has the power to make an impact on society and on our wellbeing, and it is one of the most rewarding things that we can do. It makes vital contributions to health and wellbeing, both for

those who volunteer and for those who gain from that support.

Volunteering brings communities together, and it helps people to feel valued and to be part of something good. It also brings generations together and creates a greater sense of belonging. We recognise the value of volunteering and the role of community-based organisations in delivering positive social impact.

I am delighted that Crystal FM presenters are reaching not only their community in Midlothian but listeners across Europe, North America, Australia and India, which demonstrates that Scotland's culture and creative sector is respected the world over for its creative output.

In recognition of that, the Scottish Government has published "Inspiring Connections: Scotland's International Culture Strategy 2024-30". This is the first time that the Scottish Government has set out a strategic approach to international cultural activity. We have supported the sector's international work and the new strategy aims to maximise its potential and to provide coherence to our approach.

I look forward to hearing what countries will be added to Crystal FM's future list of listeners, and I wish the team all the best for the future. The Scottish Government truly values the importance of its work, agrees with Christine Grahame that radio stations are an important part of local communities and thanks all those involved for their continuing efforts.

I thank Christine Grahame again for securing the debate, which has provided me with the opportunity not only to celebrate the success of Crystal FM in Penicuik but to note the importance of community radio right across Scotland.

13:21

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time. The portfolio on this occasion is transport. I remind members that questions 5 and 7 have been grouped together, so I will take any supplementary questions on them after both have been answered.

Anybody who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button after the relevant question. There is quite a bit of interest in asking questions on this portfolio, so I make the usual plea for brevity in questions and responses, as far as possible.

Rail Travel (Safety)

1. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I remind members of my convenership of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers parliamentary group.

To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to ensure that rail travel is safe. (S6O-03276)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Passenger and staff safety is paramount and is enforced by the British Transport Police, which works in partnership with ScotRail, Network Rail and passenger stakeholders to ensure that all passengers have safe and comfortable journeys. An example of that is British Transport Police's partnership with ScotRail's travel safe team, which has led to a reduction in antisocial behaviour on Scotland's rail network. ScotRail advises that its travel safe team has grown from eight to 24 travel safe officers, following the success of the team.

ScotRail and the British Transport Police have put a range of measures in place, on trains and in stations, with the aim of providing confidence among the travelling public and rail staff that the railway is safe and secure for all.

Richard Leonard: In 2016, ScotRail and the RMT reached an agreement that, on routes such as Barrhead and East Kilbride, services would be guaranteed a conductor on every new electrified train. It was guaranteed that the conductor would retain their full safety competency, including rules, track safety, evacuation and dispatch, and that trains operating those services would not run without a competent conductor on board.

Now, ScotRail, in public ownership, with the Government as the sole shareholder, is proposing

to rip that agreement up, denying equal access to those services for passengers with disabilities and jeopardising safety for all. These are not operational matters—they are equality matters; they are safety matters. Will the cabinet secretary intervene?

Fiona Hyslop: The member may not be aware, but there have been developments in the past 24 hours on that issue. It is not for me to express what those developments are—that will be for the employer and the trade union. The Scottish Government continues to specify a requirement that all ScotRail services should have a second staff member on board to assist passengers, and I will continue to underline that.

As regards the reference to 2016, that may be subject to the on-going discussions, which I hope will continue to take place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions. I want to get them all in, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Safety of the railway remains a reserved matter, but the Government has fully funded Network Rail Scotland in line with the Office of Rail and Road's recommendations. Does the cabinet secretary therefore share my view that Labour should not be undermining our rail sector, and the societal and environmental benefits that it offers, by inferring that it is unsafe?

Fiona Hyslop: Rail safety is reserved to the UK Government and the ORR. We are fully funding the ORR's recommendations, with an increase of £450 million in cash terms. We are leading the way on a joined-up railway. That is evidenced by the fact that the United Kingdom Department for Transport has headhunted Scotland's Railway's managing director to help it to catch up.

It is important that we have full devolution of rail powers to Scotland to enable us to deliver a railway that truly benefits Scotland. Anyone with a genuine interest in that should get behind those calls, whatever the result of the next UK general election.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Surely, if there are developments on the issue, the cabinet secretary should tell us what they are. After all, she is the Cabinet Secretary for Transport. Will those developments please the RMT?

Fiona Hyslop: It is with respect to the RMT that I am not relaying what it told me this morning. I had a meeting with the rail unions, and I understand that there may be movement on the issue.

Currently, there is, as there has been for a considerable time, the successful operation on the electric railways of ScotRail drivers supported by ticket examiners. That has been happening for some time on many rail routes. The issue between the employer and the trade union is for them to determine, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment, bearing in mind the sensitivities and that I have just met the union and heard news this morning. That is for the RMT to disclose, and it is with respect to it that I am not making any further comment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Alex Rowley can ask a brief question.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Fife circle, for example, tends to get trains that others have passed on to it. Is there a replacement train programme in place for areas such as Fife with high-speed trains?

Fiona Hyslop: The replacement of the rail fleet is a priority for the Scottish Government. It is clear that the more we electrify, the more trains will be released that can support the current Fife system. However, I am also conscious of the need to develop the decarbonised Fife route.

In the meantime, maintenance is really important. The recruitment of an additional 20 to 40 engineers has been helping the network generally, and Fife in particular. Alex Rowley is probably more interested in the longer term. I will keep him apprised of that.

ScotRail (Alcohol Ban)

2. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an update on when it will make a decision on the continued ban on the consumption of alcohol at all times on trains, in light of ScotRail's confirmation in evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that the consultation findings have been passed to Transport Scotland. (S6O-03277)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is aware that a wide range of views is held by passengers, ScotRail staff and other interested parties on the alcohol ban on ScotRail trains. ScotRail routinely asks passengers questions about a variety of topics related to the customer experience. However, those are not formal consultations; rather, they are short-duration online surveys.

The findings from ScotRail's passenger survey on the alcohol ban are being considered as part of much wider and more robust work that is being undertaken to reduce unacceptable antisocial behaviours on our public transport. The Parliament will be informed in the most appropriate way once

a decision on the future of the alcohol ban on ScotRail trains has been taken.

Douglas Lumsden: There is defer, dither and delay from the devolved Government. The temporary ban came into force in November 2020. We were told to wait for Jenny Gilruth's national conversation on rail, but that was binned. We then had ScotRail's survey of passengers, which was completed. The issue is dragging on for far too long. Can the Scottish Government please make a decision one way or the other?

Fiona Hyslop: We are making a decision by not changing that currently. However, there are genuinely strong and differing views on the issue each way, including in the chamber. It is right that we consider those views, and not least the safety and the perceived safety of women and girls.

A lot of the issues relating to alcohol are not about consumption on the trains; they are about the condition of people coming on to trains prior to their entry to the station. I say quite openly that, if we are to change the alcohol situation on trains, we would have to consider whether it would be the same as it previously was or whether we would change that. That is about as open as I can be.

I know that Douglas Lumsden is impatient, and I suspect that he wants his drink on the train back to Aberdeen, but I genuinely want the situation to be dealt with in a very open way. There are big differences in opinion and strongly held views on whether we should change the situation. That is exactly what I am wrestling with.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Karen Adam has a brief supplementary question. I hope that there will be a brief response.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Surely the priority must be users of trains feeling safe, particularly women and girls, who feel particularly unsafe in atmospheres in which there is antisocial behaviour that is accompanied by alcohol consumption. Has the ban on alcohol led to a decreased number of incidents of antisocial behaviour on ScotRail services?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary should be as brief as possible.

Fiona Hyslop: That is an example of what I was saying. There are different views, including in parties and in the chamber. The pattern of antisocial behaviour has made identifying quantifiable evidence challenging. That is what we are wrestling with in identifying a robust evidence base. The safety of women is paramount. However, I also know that the unions have different views and would like the ban to be lifted. The decision is not an easy one, but we want to proceed in the most robust and open way possible.

Public Transport (National Concessionary Scheme)

3. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how many citizens, including residents of the Cunninghame South constituency, have accessed free public transport through the national concessionary scheme in the last year. (S6O-03278)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): As of 29 February 2024, there were 2,327,913 national concessionary travel scheme card holders in Scotland, who made 177,291,227 journeys during the period from 1 March 2023 to 29 February 2024. The data is not broken down into constituency areas, as cards are issued by local authorities. However, I am pleased to confirm that there are currently 69,057 card holders in the North Ayrshire Council area, who made a total of 4,764,887 journeys during that period.

Ruth Maguire: In the "Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme—Year 1 Evaluation: Professional Stakeholder Feedback" report, one local authority commented:

"The impact has been really positive with families getting out and about together, parents not having to worry about paying out for bus fares, being able to take part in more events with not having to worry about how to get there."

Does the minister agree that that is just one of the many advantages of the scheme to young people, their families and our wider communities, in particular in the current cost of living crisis?

Jim Fairlie: Yes, absolutely. In addition, it has been estimated that families can save £3,000 for each child who makes full use of the free bus travel. The one-year evaluation of the scheme found that those savings have allowed young people and their families to spend that money on essential household costs and leisure activities, and that, for some children, the scheme has removed a barrier to joining classmates on school trips. It also makes it easier for grandparents and grandchildren to travel together, facilitating intergenerational outings.

We can add to that just being able to jump on a bus to go to visit family, whether it is to see your gran and grandad, your cousins or your favourite auntie and uncle. I have also been told about a young constituent of mine who has taken a job in Edinburgh purely because of the bus pass, and the scheme is delivering a whole host of other benefits.

Bus Services (Dumfries and Galloway)

4. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it can take to support the reversal of the reported reduction of bus services in Dumfries and Galloway. (S6O-03279)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): It is always disappointing to hear of any potential reductions in bus services, in particular in more rural areas, where—as I am well aware—those services often offer the only public transport connections to healthcare and employment.

The Scottish Government has allocated almost £430 million in 2024-25 to support bus travel, and I am committed, with bus operators and local authorities, to continuing to look at ways of improving services in order to ensure that everyone has access to public transport. However, the majority of services in Scotland operate in a deregulated market and, as such, the withdrawal of services on commercial routes is a matter for private operators.

Nevertheless, any changes must be consistent with the processes that are enforced by the traffic commissioner for Scotland. Under the Transport Act 1985, local authorities have a duty to identify where there is a social need for particular bus services, which they can subsidise at their discretion.

Colin Smyth: Services across the region have been in decline for more than a decade, and so have local government budgets. An independent report that went to this month's meeting of the South West of Scotland Transport Partnership warned that the situation is going to get worse. A summary of the report notes that

"The fragile position of the bus industry in Dumfries and Galloway is acute ... Resilience is at a historic low and the risk of further degradation is significant"

and that

"Any withdrawal of service ... capacity would have a major impact."

Does the minister accept that the current model of bus service delivery in rural regions such as Dumfries and Galloway is absolutely broken and that we need a significant increase in the provision of publicly owned and publicly run services in the region before we lose even more services?

Jim Fairlie: I agree that we absolutely need those rural services, but we have already ploughed in more than £430 million, which has been allocated to bus services and concessionary fares in 2024-25. That is providing more than 2 million people in Scotland with access to free bus travel. With more than 3 million journeys a week, those schemes are helping people across Scotland to cut their costs for essential everyday leisure and travel, which is making sustainable travel a more attractive option. Nevertheless, I understand, and fully take on board, the point that we would want to do more.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The bus network in Dumfries and Galloway is in a fragile position because of rising costs and weak demand compared with urban areas. Many people—particularly the elderly and disabled—rely on public transport. The Scottish Government provides SWestrans with only £259,000 in revenue funding, which is the same amount as it provided 12 years ago. Does the minister believe that that is acceptable, when we think about tackling climate change and addressing accessibility issues for the elderly and disabled? Is it just another example of his Government failing to address the needs of the south of Scotland?

Jim Fairlie: I apologise that I am not quite sure of the system that the member is talking about. I do not have the answer right now, but I am not sure that the fund that the member is talking about supports the national bus system. If I can get any further details on that, I will come back to him.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Bus Services Franchise)

5. Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the decision by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport to take forward plans to franchise bus services. (S6O-03280)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): We have delivered all the powers within the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which enables each local transport authority to determine the options that are available to it to improve bus provision in its area. Although some may opt for a franchising approach, others may choose to progress with a partnership or to run their own services. I welcome Strathclyde Partnership for Transport's decision to explore all available bus powers, including franchising, as part of its Strathclyde regional bus strategy.

Ivan McKee: I understand that implementing a franchise system could incur costs that run into several tens of millions of pounds. If funding is available for that investment, has the Scottish Government considered deploying it now, in advance of the roll-out of any franchise system, in order to enable SPT to support the expansion of bus routes that are currently deemed to be uneconomic, but which are critical lifelines for communities in my constituency?

Jim Fairlie: As the member is well aware, the funding that is allocated through the general revenue grant can be used to support bus services. It is the responsibility of each local transport authority, including SPT, to allocate its total financial resources to support bus and other transport services on the basis of local needs and priorities, having first fulfilled its statutory obligations. Ultimately, it is for locally elected

representatives to make local decisions on how best to improve the bus services for communities in their area.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Regional Bus Network)

7. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of Strathclyde Partnership for Transport's recommendations for the future delivery of the regional bus network. (S6O-03282)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): As I have said, it is for each local transport authority to determine which of the powers that are available to it should be used to improve services in its area. I understand that SPT has completed an options development and appraisal stage for its regional bus strategy, which considers a range of bus powers, including local authority-run services, bus service improvement partnerships and bus franchising, and that it intends to commence a six-week public consultation on its recommendations next month. I look forward to the outcomes of that consultation. Transport Scotland will continue to engage with all stakeholders to improve bus services across Scotland.

John Mason: SPT has decided to go ahead with the franchising system, if it can, but it reckons that it will take between five and seven years and will cost between £45 million and £85 million per annum. I suspect that there is little point in it doing that work if it is not going to get the money. Does the minister think that the money should come entirely from local councils? Would any of it come from the Scottish Government?

Jim Fairlie: We encourage all local transport authorities to explore all the options that are available to them to improve bus services in their area. I understand that SPT is at an early stage in the development of its regional bus strategy, which is looking at a range of options for improving services. As the strategy develops, it will require more detailed appraisals to determine which of the various options with which to progress. In a climate of increasing financial pressure, it is important that the business case for improving bus services is made robustly and in an evidence-based way in order to support future decision making on funding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): SPT's ambitious proposal to introduce a bus franchise for greater Glasgow is a welcome milestone, but SPT may establish a bus service improvement partnership with private operators in the interim—a move that risks sidetracking and delaying efforts to

introduce the regional bus franchise. The Scottish Government has cut SPT's capital budget for next year to zero. Will the Scottish Government review that ridiculous position and provide SPT with the capital that it needs—perhaps via the Glasgow city region deal—to deliver a bus franchise at speed and bypass an interim bus service improvement plan with private operators?

Jim Fairlie: Those may well be the member's views, but I go back to the point that it is up to the local transport authority to decide how it will progress.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): This week, the C60 bus service connecting Callander to Killin will be completely withdrawn, leaving many people abandoned, including those in my community of Lochearnhead. Stirling Council attempted to retender the service but, predictably, no private operator has come forward with an acceptable bid. What practical support is available to rural councils—and in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park—to take charge of bus services through franchising or even running their own services? Some of those services could link into the services that SPT will be running to the west.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question was not strictly to do with SPT, but perhaps, minister, you could respond as relevantly as you can.

Jim Fairlie: Yes—thanks, Presiding Officer. We have provided local transport authorities with a range of tools to improve bus services. I know that the member is aware that we launched the community bus fund last year to support local authorities in exploring those powers as well as improving access to bus services. Ten projects have been taken forward in 2023-24, pending compliance with fair work first requirements. They include projects to review local bus networks and to develop local transport bus strategies. By using those powers, local transport authorities, working with stakeholders, can improve local services over the longer term and make them more available, accessible and affordable.

Ferry Service (Rosyth and Zeebrugge)

6. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had regarding the proposed reinstatement of a direct ferry link between Rosyth and Zeebrugge. (S6O-03281)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I assure the member of the Scottish Government's continuing commitment to improve our transport and trade links to the continent, which has even more resonance after the United Kingdom Government's damaging exit from the

European Union. I have personally engaged with interested parties—although I think that the destination has changed, if the member is aware. Transport Scotland officials continue to communicate regularly with potential operators and Scotland's main ports.

When I met Lord Davies of Gower, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, in London on 5 February, I discussed the issue. I subsequently received disappointing written confirmation from him that the UK Government is not in a position to financially support a new service from Rosyth; it highlighted the risk of potential legal action should other operators consider such support to be a subsidy.

Because of subsidy control restrictions, any service is required to operate on a commercial basis. I hope that prospective commercial operators are able to commit to operating a successful and profitable service. However, that is ultimately a decision for them.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer. Of course, the updated route under consideration is to Dunkirk.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has been engaging in recent discussions with its own agencies and with the UK Government. I note the point about subsidy but, given the importance of a direct and vital trade link between Scotland and Europe, I wonder what other activity the Scottish Government could engage in to help to get this over the line.

Fiona Hyslop: As I said in my first answer, UK subsidy control rules significantly restrict any support that the Scottish Government could provide. However, I and my officials in Transport Scotland continue to engage with prospective operators. The Scottish National Investment Bank could be another route to supporting new services, and VisitScotland has well-established marketing opportunities to attract more tourism to Scotland. We have spoken with the Scottish National Investment Bank and VisitScotland about the potential opportunities, which we have flagged with potential operators.

I reiterate that there is a political will to support a commercially viable service but, with significant budget pressures, we have to be cognisant of the subsidy issues and the prospect of potential legal action if additional funding was provided, which makes it more important that any solution is led by the commercial ferry sector.

Bus Provision in Banffshire and Buchan Coast (Engagement with Operators)

8. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with commercial bus

operators such as Stagecoach regarding bus provision in areas like the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency. (S6O-03283)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government regularly meets commercial bus operators to discuss a wide range of issues that impact the sector. The most recent meeting with officials took place on 12 March. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to meet Stagecoach directly since my ministerial appointment, I look forward to doing so in due course.

The majority of bus services in Scotland operate in a deregulated market. However, I am committed, in conjunction with bus operators and local authorities, to continuing to look at ways of improving services to ensure that everyone has accessible public transport, which provides vital connections.

Karen Adam: I recently conducted a survey in my constituency, which received an overwhelming 1,144 responses. Almost 90 per cent of respondents feel that bus services in the area have deteriorated in the past year, and more than four in five respondents rely on those services to commute to work or school and attend vital national health service appointments. What is the minister doing to encourage companies such as Stagecoach to improve their services for constituents?

Jim Fairlie: I very much recognise the importance of local bus services to communities and that ensuring the long-term sustainability of vital local routes is a collaborative endeavour. To that end, I encourage Karen Adam to continue to work with bus operators in the area to promote the use of services and to help maintain and grow the patronage that is needed to underpin the stability and longevity of those transport links.

Karen Adam might be aware that, through the bus task force, we have worked with operators and relevant parties to address the issues that the bus industry as a whole has been facing. A report will be published shortly that will include a best practice guide for community engagement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Liam Kerr has a brief supplementary question.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A major issue in north-east bus provision is abuse of and violence against drivers and passengers. Following the tragic death of Keith Rollinson in Elgin, Unite published a 15-point blueprint to improve safety, and it has called for legislation to create a specific offence of committing a crime against transport workers. Has the minister read that blueprint? If so, which of the 15 points particularly interests him? What is his view on the proposed legislation?

Jim Fairlie: What I can tell Liam Kerr is that the cabinet secretary has written to Unite to set up a meeting, and that process is under way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow those on the front benches to change positions.

Public Transport (Fair Fares Review)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the future of public transport—the fair fares review. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Scotland's public transport system is a key enabler for growth and opportunity because it provides vital links between where people live, learn, earn and socialise. Transport is the one service that impacts on all of us all over Scotland and is doing so more over time. We know that access to affordable and reliable public transport services helps people and communities to connect to jobs, education, public services, leisure, recreation, friends and family. We also recognise that a sustainable and viable public transport system is vital to achieving our ambitions on net zero, as well as to our target to reduce the distance driven in cars by 20 per cent by 2030.

The "Fair Fares Review" report brings together a timely overview with information, analysis and international comparisons to help us collectively challenge ourselves on what the future of public transport in Scotland should be. It tells us that we are unusual internationally in having completely free concessionary travel. We subsidise rail and ferries far more than bus. Weekday journeys on rail are now at 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, and weekday bus journeys are at around 72 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. Bus passenger numbers fell by 21 per cent in the 10 years leading up to 2019-20, while demand for road, ferry, aviation and cycling all saw growth in the same period. Countries such as Singapore have a national system and support but have more state control. The review report tells us much more, and I urge people to read the detail in it.

Public transport is central to delivering the First Minister's missions to tackle poverty and protect people from harm; to deliver a fair, green and growing economy; and to prioritise our public services. That is why, in the 2024-25 budget, we are spending £3.9 billion on transport across Scotland, with almost £2.5 billion of that focusing on the public transport network. That includes £430 million in funding for concessionary travel and bus services; £308 million in active travel, low carbon and other transport policy; £1.6 billion to operate, maintain and improve Scotland's railway; and £524 million to expand our vital support for rural and island connectivity.

The review reiterates our commitment to providing financial support to access public transport for those groups across society that face particular geographical and other challenges in accessing public services, labour markets, education and leisure opportunities. It confirms our commitment to maintain the existing eligibility for the national concessionary travel schemes for those groups that currently benefit, which comprise more than 2.3 million people across Scotland. Those are the most generous schemes of their kind in the United Kingdom, enabling more than 3 million journeys per week.

We will develop a pilot project to extend free travel on rail services for companions accompanying eligible blind persons concessionary travel card holders. We will also develop proposals to provide free foot-passenger travel on interisland ferries for island residents aged under 22, and to extend the existing national ferry concessionary scheme to island residents aged under 22.

We want to do more to support fare-paying passengers, which is why we will develop a proposal for bus flat fares. We will learn lessons from the ScotRail peak fares removal pilot to inform medium to longer-term rail fares reform. That will all be complemented by the development of a bus service improvement plan and a delivery framework over the next 18 months to improve future availability of bus services, and the establishment of a national forum on the future of public transport to co-ordinate improvement of delivery of a quality, accessible, available and affordable integrated public transport system.

Despite the significant investment and the strategic direction set out by the Government, our public transport system faces a number of complex challenges. I want the debate to allow us to discuss that collectively, openly and with consideration. There are changes now in how and when people travel due to the growth of home working since the onset of the Covid pandemic, which has led to reduced patronage.

On bus, there are particular challenges—which we heard about in the previous parliamentary session—that pre-date Covid. Reduced passenger numbers result in reduced revenues flowing to public transport operators, which impacts on the financial viability of services. We need to grow patronage across all modes, but particularly in the fragile bus sector, not least because bus is currently most heavily used by lower-income groups. Therefore, any reduction in bus services will have the greatest impact on those on lower incomes, potentially limiting their links to jobs and better-paid jobs, education and other opportunities in life.

The need to grow patronage is made all the more urgent because of recent years' rises in inflation, which mean that public transport operators now bear increased costs in providing services with regard to energy, pay and so on. That can lead to pressure on operators to increase fares, thereby reducing the attractiveness of public transport and resulting in requests for additional Government support. Similarly, individuals and households face increased pressure on their budgets and on their ability to absorb the costs of public transport due to rising household bills. Those financial pressures are particularly pronounced for people living in poverty, for whom public transport fares account for a greater proportion of their disposable income.

In addressing all those challenges, the Government has to negotiate a complex delivery landscape, with different ownership models and different regulatory regimes applying across different modes. Although our ScotRail and Caledonia sleeper services are under public ownership, our public bus networks primarily operate under private ownership and control. Therefore, the levers that we have to deploy and the amount of control that we can exercise vary across the system.

In addition—this is significant, given the importance of Government funding to support our public transport system—the financial situation that the Scottish Government is facing is by far the most challenging since devolution. The shocks of more than a decade of austerity, a hard Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors are placing extreme inflationary pressures on public finances. It is therefore more important than ever to prioritise support to those who need it most and to ensure value for money in our public services. All those issues could have a substantial detrimental impact on our public transport system and on the communities, individuals and businesses that rely on it.

This Parliament is at its best when we all come with our considered views and our experiences from constituencies not only to discuss the immediate issues that we are trying to address in the short term but to plot a course for the longer term. That is what I hope will be obtained from the open debate here today.

The fair fares review has looked at individual policy interventions on the cost and availability of public transport, as well as specific transport funding and delivery models that have been adopted in a range of other countries across the world. It has considered the implications and lessons learned from those for more fundamental reform in Scotland. The review has included a comprehensive analysis of subsidy funding, patronage and benchmarking against international

comparatives. Also, through workshops undertaken in conjunction with the Poverty Alliance, it has considered the lived experience of those who are impacted by poverty and how access to public transport affects their lives. Indeed, Parliament had a debate on a committee report on employability for people facing poverty, and transport was an aspect of that debate.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Rural bus routes are in decline, with only 17 per cent of residents in remote and rural areas using the bus at least once a month. Although I appreciate that city bus routes offer stronger financial incentives, residents in rural areas deserve equal access to reliable and frequent bus services. Will the cabinet secretary support the implementation of provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to allow local councils to propose bus services in their areas to address the gaps in bus services?

Fiona Hyslop: The 2019 act, which was introduced by the Scottish Government, exists to enable that choice. Different local authorities are taking different approaches. Highland Council, for example, has taken control and had transfers of both staff and buses to itself to run, to show what can be done in its area. I think that that has happened in the city of Inverness.

I agree with Sue Webber that some of the biggest challenges are in rural and semi-rural areas, and it is important to try get sustainability in a privately operated, run and regulated system. I stress that we need to give confidence and support to the private bus operators, who are looking at innovative ways of tackling that. I am particularly impressed with the work of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire councils with First Bus to address issues that concern not just the city but the shire.

The review sets out a number of short, medium and long-term recommendations and actions to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares and funding that supports the future long-term viability of a public transport system that is more accessible, available and affordable for people throughout Scotland. In that regard, rural and semi-rural areas will be central to our thinking.

Specifically on buses, I have highlighted the proposal to develop an area-based pilot scheme to provide flat fares on bus travel, or reduce fares on zonal integrated travel, for 22-year-olds to 60-year-olds who currently pay to travel by bus. That will help to grow the bus market and assist individuals with their travel costs.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the open debate that we are having. I want to get a little more understanding of the cabinet secretary's thinking on the flat fares

scheme and how it would potentially work. Would that be a city-wide arrangement, or would it also be for buses coming into in the city, as in the Aberdeen area? Would there be a distance limit? Can she give us any other information?

Fiona Hyslop: Those are things that we will want to work out, but I am keen to see rural and city comparators. Going back to an earlier point, some of the challenges are particular to semi-rural and rural areas. We will be working with private operators, and discussions on those issues have to take place with them to identify what will make sense.

The distance limit approach is interesting. Where that has been used in city areas, we have seen that it can work well, but the geography of Scotland means that there are quite long-distance journeys. In fact, Mark Ruskell was reflecting on a journey that cost £11 or £12. Given that issue, we need to work through things to make sure that that would be a sensible proposition.

To increase stability in the bus system, Transport Scotland, working with Government, industry and other stakeholders, will develop a bus service improvement plan over the next 18 months.

On ferries, we will look at the road equivalent tariff for the Clyde and Hebrides network, which has been very successful. We want to protect and support island residents, but we will also consider further alternatives for non-islanders, particularly in relation to vehicle fares during the summer timetable.

Better integration between public transport services is vital, and we want to set out how we can work with different modes of transport. A lot of work is already happening on that—in particular, in developments in rail and ferry—to improve integration for those who have to use multiple services to complete end-to-end journeys.

It is important that we recognise that, due to legislative requirements, the area is complex. We will have to look at some issues in the medium to longer term. I know that members will be impatient for us to move on, and we will commence a review of transport governance.

I have highlighted the removal of peak rail fares, and I am sure that members will want to comment on that in their remarks.

We want to ensure—this is an important point—that we inform considerations of a wider roll-out of an integrated ticketing system and a national bus or multimodal travel card. However, we must also develop fundamental proposals for national or regional fare structures across all modes in Scotland, as seen in other parts of Europe and globally. That is the prize. It could transform how

people pay for and value public transport journeys, and encourage more people to use public transport. We will look at different methods and reflect the particular needs of different communities.

We want to develop a more accessible, available, affordable and high-quality integrated public transport system. It is a top priority for the Government, and it will help us to deliver in so many other ways. I am keen to hear the reflections of members and to hear how, together, we can further strengthen our approach to public transport in Scotland. This is not just for next month or next year but for future decades. I welcome the debate.

15:11

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I apologise—I am a little bit hoarse today. I also apologise for having to leave as soon as I have spoken. I have already spoken about that with the Presiding Officer and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport.

We have been waiting a long time for the fair fares review. It is way overdue. If it had been the equivalent of waiting for a train, we would have jumped in a car and got there quicker. The review was keenly awaited, but nothing was promised so, to that end, it did not disappoint.

When the cross-party group on sustainable transport reported on the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce car mileage by 20 per cent by 2030, one of the recommendations was that public transport should be made more affordable. That should have been the starting point of the review, because, for fair fares, we should read "affordable fares"—fares that make us want to jump on a bus, train or ferry instead of using the car.

The Scottish Government released figures yesterday that showed that just 10 per cent of people use public transport to get to work. Therein lies the challenge. If we compare current public transport use with pre-pandemic levels, we see that rail use is still down by a third and bus use is down by 17 per cent. The review could and should have been packed with concrete commitments to change that. Instead, it is full of the kind of Government speak that we have got used to, with no concrete action offered. The plan involves kicking the can down the potholed road.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Although I accept that fares are an issue, I note that some people still use their cars when they have a bus pass. Clearly, for some people, it is more of a cultural thing, or they just want to use their car, and it is not to do with the cost. Does Graham Simpson accept that?

Graham Simpson: Of course I accept that. Some people like using their car. However, some people have to use their car, because there is no bus.

I have to point out the shortcomings of the review, but I want to help the debate by suggesting things that we could do. We are at a starting point, and we need to continue the conversation. Although I might be critical in this debate, we should continue to talk. I hope that the cabinet secretary will take some of these ideas on board, and I hope that we can work together.

In the review, the word "pilot" appears 12 times. In Government speak, a "pilot" means a delay in doing anything. The review says:

"we will develop a proposal for a bus flat fares pilot for an area-based scheme to provide flat fares on bus travel, or reduced fares on zonal integrated travel for consideration in future budgets".

As I pointed out in the briefing by Transport Scotland officials that I attended, we do not need a pilot. Lothian Buses has been using flat fares and a daily cap for years, and it works. There is your pilot. We just need to get on with it.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: I will do, if I can have the time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Certainly.

Mark Ruskell: I appreciate the point that the member makes, but does he recognise that it is important that policy is evidence based? Although we have evidence of what has been done in Lothian, we do not have evidence on how a flat-fare system might work in an urban-rural area of the type that is typical in much of Scotland.

Graham Simpson: Transport Scotland should have sought data on that from Lothian Buses, but it does not appear to have done that. That would be the starting point.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: No. I have taken two interventions already.

I have been calling for a bus fare cap across the country, as has Labour, but that proposal was not even considered. How is that even credible? Such a cap should be considered straight away. That would help people across the country. In particular, it would help people who are living in poverty; more importantly, it would help people who are living in poverty in rural areas, where bus fares are higher.

Fiona Hyslop: Will Graham Simpson take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: The cabinet secretary knows that I am in a rush today, and she knows why.

I have been discussing the idea of a bus fare cap with my friends in the Poverty Alliance.

One of the more interesting ideas in the review is the idea of giving free bus travel to addicts, although the review does not say on what basis that would be done. Mention is made of another pilot. Would that apply to all travel by addicts, or would it apply only for certain journeys? How could such a scheme work? I will take an intervention from the cabinet secretary if she can clear that up.

Fiona Hyslop: Everybody recognises that access to health services is really important for people with addictions—that was recommended by the experts on the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce.

In relation to a national flat-fare scheme, what costings have the Conservatives done on that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take the opportunity to advise members that we have quite a bit of time in hand this afternoon.

Graham Simpson: Smashing. I don't have any time in hand. [*Laughter.*]

I was keen to work with the Government on developing costings for such a scheme, and I still am.

If the Government thinks that people with substance issues should get free bus travel—which is an idea that we can look at—what about unpaid carers and other groups, such as the unemployed? The review could have promised an expansion of eligibility for reimbursement under the national concessionary travel scheme to services that are provided by community transport operators under a section 19 permit. That appears as option 4 on pages 34 and 35 of the review, which is one of the options not being progressed. That will mean that under-22s, over-60s, disabled people and, soon, people who are seeking asylum who do not have local bus services in their area but instead rely on community transport will continue to be disadvantaged. They will have a free bus pass in name only.

The NCTS is a fantastic enabler, but that is the case only if people have local services on which to use it. As Scotland's bus network continues to shrink, the need for community transport to plug the gaps will only grow.

As well as a bus fare cap, we have been calling for the free travel to which the companions of blind people with concessionary cards are entitled to be extended to rail travel. I had a members' business debate on the subject in December 2022, and the proposal received support from all parties, except

the Liberal Democrats. The then Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth, spoke of her upcoming rail conversation, which never happened. She said that she would be getting advice from officials on the costs of a national scheme, and she mentioned the fair fares review—it goes back a long way—but if the minister was expecting to get advice on costs in December 2022, surely we should be further forward than developing

“the feasibility of a pilot project”.

In any case, at the time, charities in the sector, such as Sight Scotland, estimated that the cost of such an extension would be about £2 million. Let us just get on and do it.

We have also called for the extension of the concessionary travel scheme for under-22s to ferry travel for young people who live on islands. The review talks about developing proposals, so let us get them developed. Developing proposals is not the same as saying that we will do something, which is what the review should have said.

On rail travel, the review says:

“We will monitor and evaluate the ScotRail Peak Fares Removal Pilot which has been extended until June 2024, to inform medium to longer term rail fares reform.”

Why not just commit to keeping that permanently?

Sticking with rail, I recently called for the introduction of a ScotRail tap-on, tap-off system. Some trials of such a system are being done in England, and I think that that would make rail travel a lot easier and would ensure that people always pay the lowest fare—a fair fare. The technology for that clearly exists, so I urge the cabinet secretary to look at that idea if she is not doing so already.

On the subject of technology, the review did not look at systems such as “Mobility as a Service”—which allows multimodal and cross-operator travel by using an app—even though we have some pilots of that in Scotland. Some parts of England are way ahead of us on that, which is, frankly, becoming embarrassing.

Nicola Sturgeon was promising a national smart card—to be called the saltire card, naturally—in 2012, but that has not happened. However, we do have the national smart ticketing advisory board, which should be tasked with powering ahead on that within months, not years.

Fiona Hyslop: The member makes an important point, but things have moved on and people, particularly younger people, are using their phones to tap on and tap off. That is exactly the technology that we are developing—it might be not a card but a national integrated system. I met the chair of the board just this week, and there is significant progress in working with

representatives of all the modes that Mr Simpson referred to.

Graham Simpson: That is encouraging. If someone could use a bank card to tap on and off a train service—as happens on the London underground, which I am sure the cabinet secretary has used—that would be the way to go. It is certainly worth investigating.

The advisory board should speak to companies such as Fairtq and others whose technology is being used across Europe to make travel easier and, in many cases, cheaper.

Overall, the review is disappointing. It offers nothing but vague language. There are no firm commitments, and there is nothing to lure people back on to public transport. If the Government wants to cut how much people use their cars, making public transport more affordable is the way to go.

On that note, I have to go.

15:22

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): In opening the debate for Scottish Labour, I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement that she wants to take an inclusive approach to delivering the public transport reform that Scotland so badly needs. I was happy to agree that the publication of the fair fares review should be debated without a motion, so that we can really open up a debate about the review's proposals and about what we are going to do to make our transport system work.

For too many people, Scotland's public transport system is broken, and it is crucial that we fix it. My comments today are intended as constructive criticism to widen a debate that should ultimately give the Scottish people access to the mobility that the country needs if we are to see the social and economic benefits of a public transport system that works for people and meets the challenges of climate change.

The fair fares review has been the answer to almost every question about how we can make our public transport system accessible, affordable and reliable for everyone since that review was first announced, in 2021. We have been told time and time again that the work that Transport Scotland was doing would offer the insight and data needed to deliver the kind of reforms that Scotland's public transport system has been crying out for. I am therefore disappointed that the product of three years' work is a total of nine action points, divided into four short-term actions and five longer-term recommendations, with no clear timeline for delivery.

In the short term, where we need to see action, we are committed to little. A proposal on flat bus fares will be developed for consideration in future budgets. A policy will be developed on free bus travel for those who are seeking asylum, which will include previously announced funding, and the feasibility of offering concessionary travel to people with a substance dependency will be explored. Given that local authorities are being held to ransom by bus operators who are pulling out of any route that is not deemed profitable, as we have seen recently in West Lothian, and given that local authorities do not have the resources to take meaningful action to control bus services in their areas, I cannot believe that that is the extent of the Scottish Government's radical thinking.

In my opinion, the most exciting proposal in the current session of Parliament has come from Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which is now consulting on its plans to franchise bus services and take control of public bus routes and services. SPT has been very clear that its plans will need investment and co-operation from the Scottish Government, and I urge the cabinet secretary to work with it to deliver on those potentially transformative plans. Indeed, I suggest that, if we are to address the challenges, we must accept that the devolution of transport must go well beyond this Parliament and the Scottish Government. It must reach the regional transport authorities if we are to create the public control of buses that is absolutely required in order to deliver modal shift from private cars to public transport.

Fiona Hyslop: The member makes an important point about the role of regional transport partnerships, and he is right to identify the recent decision by SPT. The SNP Government introduced the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which enabled franchising and other methods. However, there is a challenge, because it is not just about Strathclyde Partnership for Transport. A number of authorities across the country are developing their thinking. I mentioned what Highland Council is doing under a municipal ownership model, but the South West of Scotland Transport Partnership is also developing its thinking, and I cannot second-guess what they will want to do or the choices that they will make.

The member is right, but it may be a question of horses for courses in different regional transport partnership areas. He should not think that the Scottish Government should necessarily support one and not others—in, I may add, a very financially restricted situation that limits what we can do in the short term. I understand the ambition, but the question is how we can change all of Scotland.

Alex Rowley: I absolutely agree, and I will go on to say that. However, I do not believe that this

Parliament or Transport Scotland can tackle and solve the problems. The transport infrastructure is different in different parts of Scotland. The key point that I am trying to make is that we need far greater devolution of powers down the way, into local authorities and, through them, into regional transport authorities, and we need to be willing, when necessary, to take steps to legislate and put in resources to support them.

If we are to address the big transport challenges, we must be bold. That means getting the powers out of here and into local authorities, but with the legislation and budgets that they require. When I was in Manchester earlier this month, I saw at first hand what powers being held at the regional level can achieve, with public control of buses. Greater Manchester is made up of 10 local authorities, with a population of 2.8 million. It has price caps on buses whereby fares for under-16s are capped at £1 and fares for those aged 16 to 60 are capped at £2. There is free travel for those aged over 60. Most important, franchising has created local control, and bus routes do not just disappear.

John Mason: The member mentioned powers and resources. Can he say anything about where the resources would come from? In London, the subsidy is about £100 per head because of the Transport for London model.

Alex Rowley: I am not trying to get to the London model.

It is interesting that a number of models have developed across England. I talked about Manchester, but Leicester has a different model, which I am just starting to look at. A lot of models are out there.

Another point that I make to Mr Mason is that, although we can make short-term gains, I am speaking about some things five or 10 years in advance. It may be an age thing for me, Presiding Officer, but if, 10 or 20 years back, we had done something that looked 10 or 20 years forward, we might not have some of these issues now. The mix involves the short term, but the Parliament also needs to start to think about the medium term and the longer term. That is how we will resolve some of the massive transport challenges that we have.

As has been stated time and again, there is no point in people having a bus pass if they can access no bus to take them where they need to go. The same principle applies to ferries, which are lifeline services for islanders, as buses are for us on the mainland.

When it comes to trains, I and the travelling public welcome the peak fares suspension pilot, which will have saved my rail-using constituents hundreds of pounds by the time the pilot ends. Those hundreds of pounds show that rail can be

an affordable alternative to the car, help my constituents with the cost of living crisis and can be spent on our local communities to benefit local economies.

Our public transport system cannot wait for the next review to provide the answers. We need an end to the multitude of policy papers and never-ending Government strategies. We need actions, not options. There is no magic bullet or one-size-fits-all solution for the transport issues that we face, but a good start is to recognise that we must devolve powers and budgets and empower regional authorities—which are, in my view, very much up for the challenge.

15:31

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome the long-awaited fair fares review, which has taken four transport ministers more than three years. I submitted written parliamentary questions asking when we could expect publication. The Scottish Government is late by three months to its own stated deadline of the end of 2023.

I am a little disappointed in the final publication of the review. In response to the various questions that I asked of the Scottish Government, I was told to expect answers in the fair fares review or the islands connectivity plan.

I welcome the Scottish Government's taking on board my repeated calls—and those of Shetland's previous members of the Scottish Youth Parliament—that, in the islands, as ferries are used as buses are elsewhere, the under-22 bus pass provision should be developed and extended to interisland ferry foot passengers. It is a shame that those who were under 22 when they called for equality in the national travel concessions will not be able to benefit from the change, given the time that it has taken to get to this point. I hope that the Scottish Government is able to speed up plans to swiftly enact that provision and ensure the maximum benefit for young islanders.

I also welcome the expansion of the age limit for four concessionary ferry journeys per year on the external service—which was previously for those aged 16 to 18 years—to include island residents aged up to 22.

Unfortunately, the review is silent on the issue of the scrapped shared cabins policy that existed for decades on the northern isles ferry route. Serco NorthLink Ferries changed that policy at the start of Covid-19 and insists that it has no plans for its return. In turn, that has meant that those who travel alone on a concessionary fare and who seek a cabin—which provides the only place in which to lie flat during the overnight crossing—have to use two of their concessionary vouchers to secure a whole cabin to themselves or must

contribute financially to the fare. Previously, only one voucher was required. It is worth noting that people who have an entitlement to concessionary travel vouchers are more likely to require a cabin for the journey. Islanders who have an entitlement to a concession and who previously used shared cabins now find that, as a consequence of that option not being available, their travel entitlement is, in effect, halved.

I have been repeatedly told that the removal of shared cabins is Serco NorthLink Ferries' decision to make but that there would be consideration, under the fair fares review or islands connectivity plan, of the impact of that decision on the concessionary vouchers. There is no mention of that in the review, and it is simply not good enough that a lifeline service can have a long-standing provision radically altered in that fashion without any assessment of the impact on those who rely on the lifeline service. As the cabinet secretary mentioned earlier, it is about enabling travel for people in poverty. That is one example of where a change in policy would help. Although I urge Serco Northlink to look again at that policy, I ask that the cabinet secretary and Transport Scotland look at the implications that the decision has had.

Similarly, island residents are impacted by the requirement to pay seasonal fares to use the lifeline ferry service, which has an unfair impact on those who rely on the service for everyday needs. An island resident exemption from seasonal fares would help to address that. The northern isles route is a vital day-to-day lifeline for residents and an essential economic link for businesses. Its primary purpose is not to provide a profit-making cruise ship—a sentiment that is often expressed to me by my constituents.

Scottish Liberal Democrats want to boost Scotland's connectivity and strengthen our climate commitments. We need to avoid the west coast experience and invest in a reliable ferry service across all of Scotland's routes. We cannot expect our vessels to go on way beyond their original intended lifespan. New vessels are an investment in the future viability and prosperity of our islands.

We also call for a change in the current ferry booking system in relation to issues that have plagued northern isles residents looking to make advanced sailings. Bookings are currently not open for January 2025. This weekend, many families will be getting together over Easter to make their winter plans for a sunshine break or to visit family over the festive period. We would like to see an end to cliff edges in the current booking system and instead have rolling bookings open a year in advance.

For all rail passengers, we would also like to see the exploration of new rail lines, especially in areas where public transport links are poor; a cut

in train fares and new options for two or three-day-a-week season tickets to reflect new ways of working; and—following the Transport for London model—the introduction of a powerful regional transport partnership to take control of bus services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that there is still some time in hand and therefore plenty of time for interventions, should members wish to take them.

15:37

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Before I make my contribution to the debate, I should make members aware that, prior to my election in 2011, I was employed by Lothian Buses for more than 20 years. Part of my responsibility was calculating route profitability across Edinburgh and submitting national concession scheme claims to Transport Scotland.

I welcome the Government's fair fares review and its aim to support public transport to become affordable and accessible. The Campaign for Better Transport briefing highlighted that, in 2022-23, there were 301 million bus journeys in Scotland, with 146 million—or nearly half—made under the national concessionary travel scheme for over-60s and under-22s.

In the coming year, that support for the bus industry is expected to reach £370 million relating to concessions, and just under £50 million for the network support grant.

The low flat fare that is referenced in the review is the business model that my previous employer has successfully operated over many decades, based on a high volume of passengers on a low flat adult fare—currently £2—which allows travel anywhere in Edinburgh and right across Edinburgh, carried on 800 vehicles with an average age of just six years.

Fiona Hyslop: Gordon MacDonald is right to identify Lothian Buses. He made the point about the high volume of passengers. However, there is a challenge around how to introduce a flat fare in a—perhaps rural or semi-rural—system in which there is not initially the volume of passengers that Lothian Buses has developed over a long time because of people's good experience of the reliability and frequency of its buses.

Gordon MacDonald: I thank the cabinet secretary for that point. She will be aware that Lothian Buses has recently extended into East Lothian and West Lothian. It may well be that it has taken on board the issue of low volume and further distances to be travelled.

Although a low flat fare is welcome, on its own it will not deliver the modal switch that the

Government seeks. It will also require investment in new buses that are dependable, comfortable, well maintained and kept clean, and which have closed-circuit television to keep passengers and drivers safe. To make journey times more attractive compared with those taken by car, there require to be park-and-ride sites to reduce car congestion in our towns and cities, bus priority lanes in order that buses can compete, and bus trackers to provide some certainty on bus times. Without such improvements in vehicles and infrastructure, commuters will not move over to public transport no matter how cheap the ticket price.

All the above features already exist in and around the Edinburgh area. The result is that, at a time when bus patronage declined by 21 per cent in the 10 years leading up to 2019-20, Lothian Buses was carrying an ever-increasing number of passengers. In 2019, it carried 119 million—a 27-year high—plus a further 5 million passengers due to the expanded network that I have mentioned. Then the pandemic hit. Last year, Lothian's total dropped by 14 million to 110 million passengers.

Despite that drop, only last year, Lothian Buses added to its long list of transport awards when it won two prizes at the UK bus industry awards. The first was for excellence in transport accessibility, which recognised improved access to travel for disabled people, and the other was for excellence in innovation and technology. That highlights what can be achieved when a transport operator is owned by the public and can invest in its service without being concerned about ever-increasing and unsustainable shareholder dividends that are demanded by a large parent transport group.

Sue Webber: Will the member take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: Let me finish my point first.

Lothian Buses is the largest municipal bus company in the UK. The City of Edinburgh Council owns 91 per cent and the other councils in Lothian share the remaining 9 per cent. In its last profitable year, prior to the Covid pandemic, it paid out £7.7 million in dividends to local councils.

I will take Sue Webber's intervention.

Sue Webber: I am sure that Gordon MacDonald will agree that, before the pandemic, the shareholder dividends that came from Lothian Buses were used to invest in services across Lothian and the city. It is also key to mention that its services are operated on commercial terms by experts in the field and not by people who work for the public local authority.

Gordon MacDonald: The £7.7 million that I just referred to is paid to the council, and the reinvestment in the network is made by Lothian Buses.

I also want to touch on the move towards a national integrated ticketing system. In my experience, bus companies are protective of their market shares and are reluctant to share the data that is required to allow ticket income to be properly allocated. An example of those difficulties can be seen by examining the performance of One-Ticket Ltd, which was formed here in Edinburgh in 2001. Its main objective was to increase the use of public transport and to achieve modal transfer from car to public transport in the Edinburgh and south east of Scotland transport partnership—SEStran—areas. The company brought together all the bus companies and ScotRail under the umbrella of an integrated ticketing system, but, in my experience, it has offered a very marginalised product. In 2010, it had a turnover of £1.3 million, but its annual accounts in 2017 identified total sales of only £850,000, and that figure has declined further in recent years. If a multiticket scheme is to be successful, the 20-year operations of One-Ticket in the Lothian area need to be closely examined so that lessons are learned and its difficulties are not replicated.

One mode of travel that was not mentioned in the review relates to the Edinburgh tram service, which does not qualify for the national concession scheme. Until last year, its costs were borne by Edinburgh taxpayers through their council tax payments; those costs are now being met by Lothian Buses. Although I understand that the tram service is considered a fixed-rail mode of transport and that, if it became eligible, there could be calls for other fixed-rail operators to ask for a similar subsidy via the concession scheme, it is the case that the bus company in Edinburgh is bearing the tram service's concession costs, which not only distorts the transport market but impacts on the bus company's profitability.

As a result of Covid, many people are still reluctant to take public transport. If we are to reduce the number of car journeys in our towns and cities, we have to reassure the public that, post-pandemic, public transport is safe and reliable. I welcome the report as a foundation from which to move towards a more affordable, reliable and accessible public transport system.

15:45

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Under the Scottish National Party, public transport has become unreliable and far too expensive. Persistent issues such as delays, cancellations and overcrowding are eroding public trust and

undermining the effectiveness of essential services. Unless considerable action is taken, our public transport network will continue to decline.

Although the fair fares review addresses some of the issues surrounding accessibility and affordability in public transport, including welcome announcements such as the expansion of the scrapping of peak rail tickets, the review fails to tackle the rising cost of public transport, contains only a few new initiatives and has taken far too long to complete. Without addressing underlying issues such as underinvestment in public transit infrastructure and regulatory barriers to competition, the review's impact may be limited in scope and short lived.

The Scottish Conservatives want to revitalise Scotland's railways and support local growth by reopening rail lines and stations. We want to introduce a Scottish smart travel card, which would enable passengers to use all domestic transport anywhere in Scotland with a contactless card or indeed, as many of us do these days, by using their phone. We would also implement provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to allow local councils to propose bus services in their areas to address gaps in provision.

However, today I want to focus on buses. In 2022-23, there were 301 million bus journeys in Scotland, accounting for 76 per cent of public transport trips. Lothian Buses, which we heard about extensively from Gordon MacDonald, operates in Edinburgh and is, I would say, considered the gold standard of buses in our country. The fair fares review committed to developing a proposal for a flat-fares pilot, stating:

"we will develop a proposal for a bus flat fares pilot for an area-based scheme to provide flat fares"—

all this alliteration is very difficult—

"on bus travel, or reduced fares on zonal integrated travel for consideration in future budgets".

That is welcome.

As we have heard, Lothian Buses already uses that flat-fare structure across the network within the Edinburgh city boundary, with familiar zoned bus fares for services that go wider and beyond the city boundary. Those are the Lothian Country and East Coast Buses brands, which reach into suburban and rural areas. We have the opportunity to get information from Lothian Buses on how it would work in both areas.

Fiona Hyslop: This is an open debate, and I am open to changing the name. Fixed price might be a better way of explaining what we want to do.

The interesting thing about Lothian Country, which I know from my constituency experience, is that it is an extension of existing routes. Therefore,

the high volume in the town might subsidise the longer routes, for example into West Lothian.

Sue Webber: I know that Lothian Country took over a lot of services from First and McGill's Buses and relies on express services that do not stop everywhere across the city and so are still specifically for West Lothian residents.

Importantly, there is still the simple taptapcap system in place for a card or a phone, whether people are on Lothian Buses, Lothian Country or East Coast Buses. There are daily and weekly maximums that cap people's payments. The technology already exists. Instead of having another pilot, we need to move ahead more quickly. There are calls in the city to integrate with the Edinburgh tram, but let us not get ahead of ourselves—let us get the buses and the taptapcap first.

I welcome hearing about the integrated ticketing being multimodal. That is something of a holy grail for me, and I look forward to that moving ahead. London has Transport for London and we have all experienced going across various modes. I welcomed Graham Simpson's comment about tapping on and tapping off, as that would mean that people would get the best fare no matter where they got on and off public transport.

We need to be mindful of the rise in antisocial behaviour that is being seen on buses. In the transport portfolio questions session before this debate, Liam Kerr, who is a member for North East Scotland, mentioned some of the tragic events that have happened. We need to be mindful that there has been a rise in antisocial behaviour on our buses since the under-22s free bus travel scheme was introduced. We have certainly been aware of that in Edinburgh. I know that Lothian Buses has

"a zero tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour and will not hesitate to remove services from particular areas for a period of time if necessary to keep our colleagues and customers safe."

Fifty-four per cent of people in large urban areas use a bus at least once a month. That is quite different from the rural statistics that we hear about. It is vital that the bad behaviour of a few youths does not impact on the majority of people who use public transport responsibly.

Although there are concerns across the country that free bus passes are fuelling youth crime and disorder, I do not believe that the solution is to get rid of the free bus pass scheme, even for those abusing the passes in that way. However, I believe—I know that we have debated this in the chamber in the past—that there needs to be some consequence of that poor behaviour.

Back in October last year, I had a very informative visit to the Linburn centre in West

Lothian, which is a Sight Scotland veterans centre. I am really pleased that a pilot project to extend free rail travel for companions of blind persons concessionary travel card holders has been agreed in the Scottish Government's fair fares review. Everyone I met that day was really vocal about that campaign, so I am delighted. That was a great win for them and Sight Scotland.

Those asleep at the wheel might not be aware that I have been campaigning for a new train station in a small place in West Lothian called Winchburgh. That is the vital missing link that would give Winchburgh people direct access to national train services. A station is essential, because Winchburgh people need a sustainable, low-carbon alternative to cars to access services and jobs that many have in the capital city. Winchburgh is set to be home for more than 4,000 families due to a large expansion agreed as part of the Edinburgh city region deal. I am certain that ScotRail would be delighted with the increase in passengers that that would result in. That is why I suspect that it has already built in a stop at Winchburgh in the timetable for the Edinburgh to Dunblane service.

Winchburgh Developments funded a new junction on the M9 to allow direct access for cars from the fast-expanding Winchburgh village. *[Interruption.]*

I am sorry, but I am getting distracted by members talking. It is okay—I will carry on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes. Please carry on.

Sue Webber: A station is vital if we are to reduce the congestion that our city faces, and we must provide vital public transport links for that expanding village if we want to hit our net zero objectives. I have been working with the Scottish Government, the UK Government, the cabinet secretary and West Lothian Council to make that project a priority. Winchburgh provides the perfect example of revitalising Scotland's railways to support local growth.

15:53

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): My wife has a nickname for me. She calls me Bob the pedestrian—she also has other nicknames—because I do not drive, although I am very pass-remarkable. I have tried to drive, not because I wanted to, but because of the pressure that I felt under, as driving is seen as the default option. I also wanted to support the day-to-day task of ensuring that, with a young family, we were able to go about our daily lives.

Fortunately for the environment—and, I suspect, for road users, bus companies and ScotRail—

driving was certainly not my thing. Therefore, I use trains and buses on an almost daily basis as part of my daily routine, not through choice but through necessity. However, it is worth noting that, with the income that I earn, I have the option of taking taxis from time to time. Quite frankly, that is not an option that many of my constituents have.

The fair fares review is therefore fundamental for my constituents. It is fundamental for people, such as me, who never wanted to rely on a car and could not drive even if they wanted to, and for others who feel poorly served by public transport services, particularly our bus network, in terms of affordability, comfort and connectivity. Significantly, it is also about how we persuade others to make a positive choice to switch to buses or trains and support a very fragile bus network in our country in particular.

Action 6 in the review report is to

“develop the business case for ... a national and/or regional integrated ticket and fare structure.”

I understand that that is for buses. However, I wonder why there is a separate recommendation, in action 1, for flat fares for buses.

I will float two ideas. Both those things could be achieved at the one time. In an area such as Glasgow, as outlined in the review, an integrated ticketing system could also include trains. In looking at that, I would commend consideration to be given to Glasgow's urban rail and bus network, and indeed the greater Glasgow network. It must surely, in some ways, already be close to being an integrated system.

First Glasgow has a tap-on, tap-off capped-fare ticketing system, capped at £20.40 a week. If I wanted to add on other bus companies, I could get a Glasgow tripper ticket for £24.60, on which commercial companies have reached an agreement. However, if I opted—if members are still following this—for a First Glasgow tap-on, tap-off ticket across the entire network, that would actually be £26.70.

We may forget that the SPT's own card still exists, for rail, bus and the subway.

Fiona Hyslop: It is striking that we are not only further ahead on the technology platforms for phone and card, with regard to the advice that we are getting on procurement to ensure that the technology can be interoperable among all operators, but we have a far more extensive regional integrated ticketing service. What we do not have—yet—is a national integrated ticketing service. Bob Doris has given an example of a regional integrated ticketing service.

Bob Doris: I appreciate that. I am giving an example of what is almost an integrated regional system. We are almost there, which means that it

would be ideal for a pilot, as we are close to delivering what we need to deliver.

There is also the zone card, for example. For four zones and up, it costs £32.90. Someone can, therefore, pay £20.40, £24.60, £26.70 or £32.90. It is not beyond the realms of possibility to get the subway, train and bus in the Glasgow area to introduce an integrated ticketing system, with a capped provision, very effectively, in relatively short order.

I believe that taking away the complexity of those pricing structures, with flat daily and weekly fares that are fully integrated and affordable across bus, rail and subway, would better support my constituents across Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn. It would also support me, as I depend on buses and trains. It would also make sense for my constituents who do not currently use public transport to do so; they could switch on that basis.

I am aware that the bus network operators in Glasgow would cite the extensive nature—my constituents may agree—of the urban rail network as one of the reasons why they find it challenging to run what they would consider to be commercially viable services. In my constituency, we have particular issues later in the evenings and at weekends. Drawing in ScotRail, with better integration of bus and rail services within the urban Glasgow areas, would, therefore, make perfect sense.

In returning home this evening, I could, depending on when I arrive back at Queen Street station, have up to an hour to wait for a train on the Maryhill line to get my connection back to Summerston. I could jump on the subway or train to Partick and get a bus to Maryhill—perhaps the 8 or the 90, if it ran a more extensive service. Indeed, I could get the train to Anniesland, as there are many train services to Anniesland apart from those on the Maryhill line, if a bus service existed that connected Anniesland back through the north of Glasgow across to Maryhill. I know that my constituents in Kelvindale and Ruchill, for example, would very much appreciate that.

I absolutely accept, however, that that all costs money. We need a robust business plan with the aim of growing paying passenger numbers on buses and on trains. We need greater frequency of buses, in particular at peak times. I was struck by Gordon MacDonald's comments that buses have to be clean, safe and welcoming environments. They also have to be family friendly. There have been many times when I have stood outside the large Tesco in Maryhill with my two-year-old girl in a buggy, hoping that no one else with a pram turns up, because we would then have to race each other to get on the bus. We have to decide what a bus network should look

like in five, 10 or 15 years' time in order to be truly family friendly.

Alex Rowley: I find what Bob Doris says really interesting. Operators have said to me that we need to give buses more space on the roads, with much more provision such as dedicated bus lanes. They also tell me that, in Glasgow specifically, the road works and traffic congestion puts people off getting the bus.

Bob Doris: I agree with that, but I offer a slight note of caution, because such provision sometimes means fewer bus stops, which means a poorer service for constituents, in particular those with mobility issues. Sometimes a bus lane can pass by whole stretches of commercial retail units and drop people off at the large supermarket—that is where my bus stop is—so that they do not use the small local retailers. I say yes to Mr Rowley, therefore, but with a note of caution.

I was also interested to hear that the role of hospitality was included in the fair fares review. Of course, that sector needs our support as it is a key partner. I am thinking about Glasgow as an event city. The maximum capacity of the Ovo Hydro in Glasgow is 14,300 people; for a football game at Hampden park it is 51,866; at Celtic park it is more than 60,000; and at Ibrox it is more than 50,000. At Celtic Connections, 115,000 people buy tickets every year for 300 performances. I do not want to add to the cost of people's night out or day out, but if we are truly serious about Glasgow having a world-class, connected public transport system, we should consider what a pound on a ticket could deliver for Glasgow's public transport system. It could have a phenomenal impact on providing better support for the people who cannot afford to take taxis to go to those events and do not have cars to get to them. It could be a more equitable way of dealing with Glasgow's public transport solutions.

Finally, on the frequency of services, I want to see franchising and greater public control, but I am also not opposed to a bit of corporate sponsorship. What about free bus Fridays, sponsored by Diageo or Irn-Bru? We have large corporations in Scotland. Why are we not drawing them in to invest in our public transport system through corporate sponsorship? We did say that it was an open debate, so that is one more idea.

16:01

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my trade union affiliations that are in my voluntary register of interests.

The cabinet secretary does not have her problems to seek: 150 job cuts at Network Rail over the past six months; just last week, the

announcement of more than 40 more redundancies at Babcock Rail in Lanarkshire; a clear breach of the 2016 collective agreement between ScotRail and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers on driver-only operations; fermenting growing industrial unrest; and still no definitive ruling on railway station ticket hours, with cuts to services, cuts to jobs and downgrades not ruled out. And yet, we are told in the report before us today that the Government's vision in the national transport strategy is of

"a sustainable, inclusive, safe and accessible transport system"

when we know that each of these cuts and each of these backward steps reduce inclusivity, put at risk passenger safety, narrow accessibility, and so set back sustainability.

In a section in the report under the heading "Rationale for Intervention", we are told that

"both ScotRail Trains Limited and Caledonian Sleeper Ltd" are

"now under public ownership and controlled by ... Ministers"—

"controlled by ... Ministers".

That is why I call for the cabinet secretary to exercise that control; to intervene; to stop these safety-critical job cuts; to keep these skills in the network; to ensure that ScotRail abides by the 2016 collective agreement on electrification; and to once and for all call off these ticket office cuts and closures.

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate Richard Leonard taking a considered and constructive approach and tone, as was intended by our having a debate without a motion. He raises serious points, but I also want to raise a point about control. He started his contribution by talking about Network Rail. Does he understand that Network Rail is reserved to the UK Government? If we are looking at the future for Great Britain rail and if he wants us to have the collaboration and co-operation that Scotland currently has between ScotRail and Network Rail, we need powers in this Parliament, not with the UK Government, which takes decisions over which we do not have control. Does he want the powers over Network Rail to be brought back to this Parliament?

Richard Leonard: That is a point of view that I would expect a nationalist to express. We share this island with a rail network. The minister is now in control of the Caledonian sleeper service, which is cross-border.

I get that there is a ScotRail Alliance that brings together Network Rail in Scotland and ScotRail as the operating company, which is now part of the public sector.

I will say a little more about the cabinet secretary's views on devolution in a second, but I would ask her and other MSPs to look at the report that we are considering today. It is all there on page 24, where it says:

"Rail fares are extremely complex with a range of products (sometimes as many as ten fare types for one journey depending on where and when the journey is being made)."

It continues:

"Passenger research has shown that confusion over buying the right ticket type is acting as a barrier to encouraging modal shift from car to rail."

So, if ever there was a case for simplifying the ticket system and not reintroducing peak-time fares, if ever there was a case for integrated ticketing—which we have been promised since 2012 but which we have once again been told this afternoon to wait again for while the Government considers options—if ever there was a case for extending booking office hours, not contracting them, this is it.

I also have to ask the cabinet secretary to reflect on her ministerial foreword to the report, where she writes of the "constraints of devolution", but, in the very next paragraph, we are reminded that, under the constraints of devolution,

"ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper are now under public ownership."

The Clyde and Hebrides ferry routes are in public ownership and there is no reason, under the so-called constraints of devolution, why other ferry services could not be in public ownership or why our bus services could not be under public municipal ownership, either.

Incidentally, as we are debating fares policy this afternoon, compare the fare policy of Lothian Buses in the east with those of bus operators in Greater Glasgow in the west, where private operators such as First Bus charge over 40 per cent more for a standard adult ticket than municipally owned Lothian transport.

The cabinet secretary needs to reflect, too, that in the paragraph that follows that one she writes:

"we provided over £1 billion of additional financial support to ensure our public transport services were protected ... throughout the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic",

when she knows full well that those were largely Barnett consequentials and that those levels of additional spending resulted not from the constraints of devolution but as one of the benefits of devolution.

The Climate Change Committee warned last week that Scotland's climate change goals for 2030 are no longer credible. It said that the fair fares review needed a plan to

“make public transport ... more attractive, increasing its frequency, reliability and cost-competitiveness against car travel.”

Next Monday is two years to the day since ScotRail entered public ownership. It is also the day that ScotRail fares will rise by 8.7 per cent. If the Scottish Government does not make the no-peak-fare scheme permanent, many passengers face the return of massively increased rail fares from June, and that would only serve to discourage passengers from using rail and push many more of them into cars.

For me, it is clear and becoming clearer by the day that we cannot resolve the climate crisis by sticking to the existing order. We have to transcend the old horizons. We need to leave behind the profit motive and the shareholder dividend in our public services. We have to put forward the case for change, because massive corporations have too much power over the fate of our communities and our planet. This is not a time to be backward—it is a time to go forward and a time to be bold.

16:09

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Before looking to the future of public transport in Scotland, we must recognise where we are and how we got here. Scotland does not have a publicly owned public transport system; we had one until the Tories at Westminster and the Labour Party in regional councils across Scotland conspired to privatise our buses, and then the Tories did exactly the same with our railways.

The Scottish Government has taken the bold step of returning ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper to public ownership.

Alex Rowley: I am confused, because I remember that, in Fife, the regional council was certainly opposed to the buses being privatised. I am confused by what Kevin Stewart has said, because that certainly did not happen in Fife.

Kevin Stewart: I am not au fait with every aspect, but I know that Labour-controlled regional councils did not do enough to stop that privatisation. I will come to Lothian in a second, because it got it right.

As I was saying, it is great that the Scottish Government has brought ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper back into public ownership, although private services still run on our tracks. In my opinion, the nationalisation has been a great success, and it shows a route forward.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will take it in a little while.

Buses are a different matter. Most bus routes in Scotland are run by private companies, with subsidies from Government and local councils. Lothian Buses in Edinburgh is, of course, the notable exception and has remained in public hands. Everyone here who uses Lothian Buses on a regular basis knows that it is a fine example of what can be achieved when public transport is in public hands. I wish that the same had happened in Grampian as happened here in Lothian.

Although I firmly support all of our public transport being in public hands, we must accept the fiscal position that we, in Scotland, find ourselves in. The UK Government's on-going cuts to public services and infrastructure mean that billions have been cut from Scotland's block grant. While the Tory Government continues its death spiral of slashing public spending and cutting taxes for the wealthy, and the Labour Party promises five more years of the same, we must work with what we have, or we must seek the path to independence.

The fair fares review offers a set of recommendations and actions to achieve the best for Scotland's public transport in these difficult times. Scotland's public transport is—and will be—key to economic development, and a core future aim must be to provide an affordable and reliable public transport service that unlocks economic growth by connecting workers with jobs on time and for a reasonable fare.

Alongside that, our public transport needs to facilitate customers getting into our town centres to access retail, leisure and recreational opportunities. Marrying up the needs of our town centres with the needs of business and customers will be key to stopping the decline in our town centres, which is caused by online shopping and working from home.

Fiona Hyslop: The changing experience of customers is really important. Looking at the growth in weekend public transport use is important, because it lends itself to that event and leisure experience. In Glasgow, there was a strong campaign—with the city and the hospitality sector, across different modes—to encourage people not to come in by car for their Christmas events but to travel by public transport.

Does Mr Stewart agree that looking at the changing nature and use of public transport will be important not only in planning—yes, by operators—but in incentivising and in looking at the ticketing offers that we want to develop?

Kevin Stewart: I agree completely and utterly with the cabinet secretary. One thing that has happened in Aberdeen of late was some controversy about a bus gate on Market Street, which has actually helped the flow of public

transport. Recognising the controversy and trying to get more folk on to buses, both First Bus and Stagecoach in Aberdeen waived fares at the weekend to encourage more folk on to public transport, with some success.

Public transport is key to achieving our aims. To start, we need to build on the exceptional success of the free bus passes, which are the most generous schemes of their kind in these islands, with just under half the Scottish population already being able to access free bus travel.

While reducing inequality by maintaining the free bus pass for young folk, older people and disabled people, we need to ensure that public transport is the default option for all. A core part of that will be a single easy-to-understand fare for going from A to B, and an integrated ticketing system and zonal fares will be important in achieving that.

For longer journeys, our railways will be the backbone to underpinning our success. Again, integrated ticketing and fares will be key to encouraging greater use of rail for all types of journeys and ensuring that, when anyone in Scotland decides to make a longer trip, getting the train is their first thought. The abolition of peak fares pilot has done much to get people back on our railways, and I hope that the analysis that the Government will undertake will show that it should be kept.

Part of the success of our railways has been the reopening of stations that used to serve communities. In Scotland, we can be proud of our recent success in reopening railway stations, such as the one at Kintore, with Levenmouth to come shortly. I am supportive of the Campaign For North East Rail, which aims to reconnect Fraserburgh and Peterhead to Aberdeen by rail. Of course, there are also advantages in opening railways through the increased opportunities for freight, but that is probably a matter for a different debate.

Let us make public transport our go-to option by building a system that is fit not only for today but for tomorrow.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I say to colleagues that we have probably eaten up quite a lot of the time that we had in hand.

16:17

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for having a debate without a motion. For some members, it has changed the tone; others, unfortunately, are back to their default tone. The launch of the fair fares review has been important, because it now allows a wider conversation to begin. It has been a

priority of SNP ministers and Scottish Greens to see the fair fares review to completion.

Last week's UK Climate Change Committee report was, of course, a wake-up call for us all. Road transport accounts for almost a quarter of Scotland's carbon emissions, and it is a key area in which we need to make lasting systemic change. We urgently need to shift folks from cars to public transport, but people vote with their feet, and they will make that shift only if the public transport offer is accessible, affordable and reliable.

We absolutely need cheaper fares, and integrated ticketing is key to that. We already have one of the widest concessionary schemes on bus, enabling 2.5 million people to travel for free. Free bus travel is an absolute lifeline for people who face inequality. I welcome the recommitment to expand the scheme on bus for people who are seeking asylum and for people who are suffering from drug dependency. I also welcome the new pilot project to extend free travel on ScotRail for companions of people who hold a blind person's concessionary travel card. I look forward to updates on all that work when possible.

Of course, there is much more that we can do beyond the concessionary schemes to ensure that public transport is affordable for all. I warmly welcome the flat-fare trial. Councils that span both rural and urban areas and are working hard to restore bus services with communities will be well placed to trial a flat fare as part of a package to reboot local bus services. The off-peak-all-day pilot on ScotRail will also give us evidence of how simplifying fares on the railways has worked in relation to both farebox income and passenger numbers.

The next step is to join up our fragmented public transport network. I am pleased to see a commitment to a national integrated ticketing system and an all-age national travel card and fare structure. It is so obvious that having a card or an app that joins everything up makes sense. Shetland manages to do it, and Glasgow offered it during the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—so, in time, we can surely get that approach rolled out everywhere else.

Having mentioned Shetland, I welcome the commitment to extend not just the national concessionary ferry scheme to under-22s, but to move beyond that commitment and offer free fares for under-22s on interisland ferries. That will be liberating for young people who live in our islands. I also note that the road equivalent tariff will continue, but I welcome the intention to strike a better balance that supports island residents first and foremost in the design of that scheme.

Many members have reflected on the need to fix the broken models that have left communities without decent bus services. For too long, rural bus routes have been vulnerable to the boom and bust cycle of deregulation and privatisation. In the past month alone, we have seen lifeline routes such as the C60 between Killin and Callander, which I mentioned earlier, and the X7 in the Carse of Gowrie axed. Our communities deserve better. With SPT recently deciding to push forward with franchising, the future is looking brighter. Public and community ownership can bring genuine benefits to bus services, whether in Glasgow or rural Perthshire, and now is the time to start accelerating progress.

Undoubtedly, we need radical improvements to public transport. If we are serious about making that a reality, we need to redirect some of the capital away from carbon-intensive roads and into the infrastructure that we need for sustainable transport. Instead of doubling down on new road-building projects, we need to invest in the infrastructure that will supercharge our public transport across Scotland.

Demand-management measures and road-user charging models could be used to fund public transport improvements while they also reduce our transport emissions. I ask members to imagine what the impact of the congestion charge would have been in Edinburgh had it been brought in 20 years ago after that debate, and what kind of investment we would have been able to achieve in our public transport infrastructure in the city.

Alex Rowley: Will the member give way?

Mark Ruskell: If there is time in hand, I would like to.

The Presiding Officer: There is a little time in hand.

Alex Rowley: Does the member accept that the bus partnership fund and putting in place bus lanes have been crucial, and that getting buses moving fast is just as important as fares?

Mark Ruskell: Absolutely. Bus lanes are a critical example of the infrastructure that we need. Mr Rowley will recognise that, this year, the Scottish Government is under incredible pressure with its capital budgets, but that is exactly the kind of infrastructure that we need. We need more investment in Edinburgh, and if we had started that congestion charge 20 years ago, perhaps we would have been able to see much more of that investment.

It is good to see it said in the fair fares review that

“the cost of motoring relative to public transport needs to be addressed.”

Not many members have focused on that point in the debate, but work on that must continue at pace.

I am proud of what the Government has already achieved. There is free bus travel for all young people under the age of 22 across Scotland, with more than 100 million journeys to date. There is new funding and powers for local authorities to wrest back powers from private companies to franchise and run their own services, for people and not for profit. There is record investment in active travel infrastructure, transforming our towns and cities into safer and more accessible places to walk, wheel and cycle. Those measures all need to be celebrated, but of course we have to go further and faster. I hope that the fair fares review can be the springboard that we need to do just that. I look forward to working alongside the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to make that hope a reality.

16:23

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the publication of the review. After it had been given as the answer to many portfolio questions, we now have the document. That is to be welcomed, but a degree of disappointment has already been expressed this afternoon.

For the past two decades, the cost of public transport in the UK has increased—not just relative to driving, but above inflation. Prior to the pandemic, increasing running costs and higher passenger fares had led to a fall in users, and the impact of that is still being seen. The “Fair Fares Review” report includes a recommendation to rebalance the cost of travel, in which it highlights the commitment to making sustainable travel “more attractive”. It states that, to achieve that,

“the cost of motoring relative to public transport needs to be addressed.”

We need to be careful here. Public transport costs have risen more quickly than the costs of driving have but, for many people, public transport is not an option.

We need to consider the realities of car usage if we want to make motoring cost prohibitive. Although we need fewer people to use private cars, and there are interventions that would make car use more expensive, the focus needs to be on making public transport more affordable and reducing the cost of travel. We know that some people choose to drive because it is a cheaper option and, in a cost of living crisis, we should be doing what we can to reduce household costs. The climate aims of reducing car use and encouraging modal shift have to be seen alongside the social aims of improving the

accessibility and affordability of public transport options.

The Government's commitment to the review made it clear that the landscape of declining car travel costs versus increasing public transport costs was exacerbating the impact on those living in poverty, who are often in low-car-ownership communities. The Levenmouth rail link has already been mentioned. One of the key drivers for the delivery of that rail link is that it is in an area with very low car ownership and high levels of poverty. I hope that the Levenmouth rail link will make a significant difference to that community.

Behind the review is the need for equality and making public transport systems affordable for all. Unfortunately, we are not seeing the progress towards reform that would result in that. I agree with Mark Ruskell that we need more pace and focus. For people who are on lower incomes, public services such as transport are vital to their daily lives and to accessing employment, education, healthcare and leisure activities. However, too often, rising costs and poor links put that at risk.

In a time of increasing financial pressures, delivering reliable and affordable public transport is a way in which the Government can support households and help to address the stubborn rates of poverty that continue in Scotland. Conversely, raising transport fares can put unacceptable strain on people who are already struggling to afford public transport.

When it comes to addressing rising costs, the Poverty Alliance welcomed the pilot on flat-fare ticketing, but it criticised the lack of urgent action and said that the new commitments were "limited", particularly for those who are on low incomes. The alliance also highlighted that

"many of the areas ... raised by the Citizen's Panel as a priority"

have been "omitted" or "not progressed" because of cost. It would be helpful to see some of the financial reasoning behind the decisions. I know that the cabinet secretary talked in her opening statement about the immediate financial pressures that we face, but we need to look for creative solutions.

For people who are on low incomes, cost is the key concern about public transport, and they need more action to improve access and affordability. The report indicates that, in the medium to long term, there will be consideration of support for "those experiencing financial poverty", but we need that work to be prioritised.

On rail travel, the report highlights the complexity of rail fares and the lack of standardisation in terms of restrictions, available

fare types and fares themselves. There is no standard pence per mile—or kilometre—measurement used, although the Scottish Government uses that measure when it compares ticket prices with those in the rest of the UK.

There is variation in the costs per mile for different journeys in Scotland. Many people in Fife who travel from Dunfermline, Burntisland or Markinch to Edinburgh pay more per mile than those who make journeys from Glasgow, Falkirk or Perth to Edinburgh.

The original basis for the regulated fare structure is opaque. ScotRail inherited the fares that were in place when British Rail was privatised in 1996. Since then, it has applied an annual increase formula, but no one seems to know how the fares were originally set. One of the medium to long-term recommendations in the report includes the development of

"proposals for a new fare offering ... to encourage"

an increase in rail market share. However, that must look at how the fares are set, as well as how they can change to reflect passengers' different needs.

The removal of peak rail fares pilot, which has been a welcome step in reducing costs for passengers, has been under way for almost six months, and it is frustrating that we have not been provided with any detail about the on-going evaluation of how it is working. Anecdotally, we have seen that the pilot has been successful in getting more people on trains, but I am keen to find out whether that cohort is new or returning passengers and how the pilot has impacted people on lower incomes.

For commuters in Fife, there continue to be services for which capacity is not able to match demand, which is a problem that has been exacerbated by reduced numbers of carriages and by cancellations. As part of the pilot, the ScotRail website provides information on which services are busiest, so that passengers can try to avoid them. However, the list of busy services includes every service that goes through Fife to Edinburgh in the morning peak period—many services are full by the time that they reach Inverkeithing. There are passengers who have not been able to get on trains, and many more are regularly paying to stand. Such service issues, in addition to cancellations and delays, must be addressed to ensure that rail is an attractive travel option.

In closing, I will touch briefly on active travel. To get people on to public transport, we need to provide a reliable and affordable service. We also need to improve accessibility and linkages with active travel. If we are to encourage people to choose the bus or the train over the private car,

they must be able to get to bus stops or train stations easily and safely.

The results of a survey by Sustrans that were published this week showed that the majority of people in urban areas support shifting investment from road building to funding active travel and public transport. The survey also found that people want to have the choice to walk, cycle and use public transport more. We need to make it easier for them to do that, which will help us to achieve the health, environmental and economic benefits that we all want to see.

The Presiding Officer: John Mason will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:30

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate, not least because I am enthusiastic about travelling and about public transport—especially our railways. However, I am happy to state that I have a car, too. When I go camping, there is no way that I can carry my tent and other equipment on the bus or the train, so I take the car.

I will start with one point on which I am in complete agreement with what the report says. The foreword says that we should

“support people to encourage that shift to use their car less and use public transport more”.

I accept that it can be a big step for someone to give up their car altogether but, if we all reduced our car usage and increased our use of public transport, that would make a big difference to road congestion, and it would also help to improve our health. As a bonus, on the train or the bus, there is more time for reading or working.

Douglas Lumsden: While listening to John Mason, I was thinking about car clubs. Does he think that they could be rolled out more to encourage people to give up their cars?

John Mason: I did not intend to mention that in my speech, but I am enthusiastic about car clubs. An Enterprise car club is based in my constituency. In Inverness, the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership offers the Go-Hi app, which brings together the train, the bus, the taxi, walking and the car club. That is excellent.

It is clear that cost is a factor. Once we have a car and have paid for the insurance and the MOT, the extra cost of taking it to the shops, football or even Parliament is relatively low, because all that we have to pay for is the petrol and maybe the parking, whereas it can be expensive to take a family of four on the train, even with off-peak fares and special offers.

I suspect that we will never get the marginal cost of one trip on public transport down to the marginal cost of the same trip by car—unless the bus is free, which it is for those who have a bus pass. At this point, I must declare that I do.

That reminds us that we need to have not just a carrot but a stick approach. In Scotland, we largely have control over the carrots, but the stick of increasing the cost of using a car falls to Westminster. In its briefing, Transform Scotland makes the valid point that fuel duty rates have not risen enough in recent years, and we have not yet cracked the nut of how owners of electric cars are to pay their fair share of road costs if they are not to do so through fuel duty.

As the report points out, much of our public transport is not expensive compared with that in other parts of the UK. The ferry from Ullapool to Stornoway takes about two and three quarter hours, and a passenger return fare costs £22. The ferry from Penzance to Scilly takes a similar amount of time, and a passenger return fare costs £186.

When we are talking about fair fares, we have to ask, “Fair for whom?” They must certainly be fair for the passenger, but what about the taxpayer? Is it fair that a taxpayer with no train station nearby pays some £300 per year for our railway system? That is for each member of their family. As I said, I am enthusiastic about public transport, and I think that we should have higher taxes to support it, but we still need to be realistic about how much we can afford and where we draw the line.

Peak-time train fares are currently suspended and, like other members, I look forward to learning the results of the pilot scheme. I see some evidence of increased passenger numbers in the mornings, but I fear that income from fares will have suffered, and I wonder whether that is sustainable.

There are cost factors when it comes to buses. Strathclyde Partnership for Transport is proposing a franchise system, which would have an annual cost of some £45 million to £85 million. That equates to about £20 to £40 per head of population in Strathclyde each year, which is a lot less than in London, where the subsidy is £100 per resident per year.

Some have suggested that public ownership of buses is the answer, but that would still come at a cost, and I suspect that it would not satisfy everyone. When I was younger, the buses were run by the corporation, but there were still complaints that too many buses went to Castlemilk and not enough came to Rutherglen. That would happen again.

On the subject of Glasgow, we have an excellent train and bus service, but that depends

on exactly where people live and where they want to go. There are 11 rail stations on two separate lines in my constituency, which is an area that is roughly 7 miles long by 3 miles wide. I have recently been attending Gartnavel hospital a bit. It has a tremendous rail service and is right at the door of Hyndland station, with trains to many stations from there, but the car park is still jammed full of vehicles, perhaps because some people either must or choose to use their car.

As the train service from somewhere such as Carmyle in my constituency has been electrified and improved, the bus service cannot compete on trips to the city centre and has therefore declined. However, not everyone wants to go to the city centre, and buses stop more frequently and closer to destinations such as local shops, the general practitioner, the dentist and schools, so there is no question but that we need both rail and bus in Glasgow.

Public transport is complex and I do not believe that there is one simple answer, but simplifying the system and making it easier to use would be a big step forward. Bob Doris explained a lot of the complicated systems in Strathclyde. To give another example, people can get concession tickets on the trains in Strathclyde, but they are not available from ticket machines or on the ScotRail app. That should be better integrated.

I have a constituent who is fanatical about split ticketing, which is the ability to split the journey when buying tickets, while the journey is actually on the same train. I told him that I was not going to raise that today, but I have decided that I will. For example, I looked at a return ticket from my station, Garrowhill, to Mallaig. The ScotRail app tells me that a day return on Monday would cost £50.15. However, if I used Trainline to split the ticket at Queen Street, that would cost £32.30 plus £2.60, which comes to £34.90. That journey costs 43 per cent more for those who do not know how to split their ticket.

Given that money is tight, we should target support towards those who are most in need. The report acknowledges that the existing systems are targeted towards specific groups that are based on age and health, rather than on low income. One obvious option might be to raise the age for the older persons national concessionary travel scheme from 60 to 66, to match the pension age, but I fear that that might not be popular. People who are aged 60 to 65 are good voters, so would any political party dare to upset them in that way?

We must be realistic about our finances and about which good things we can or cannot afford to do. This week, both the Finance and Public Administration Committee meeting and a breakfast briefing organised by the Scottish Parliament information centre were on the subject of the

Scottish Fiscal Commission's report "Fiscal Stability Perspectives: Climate Change", which overlaps with the topic of this debate. We cannot afford to do all that we would like to do, so it is important that we choose the right priorities and spend our money where it will have the maximum impact.

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

16:37

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome this debate without motion, which I think has made for higher-quality debate.

If we are being honest, there must be some acknowledgement that there has been long-term underinvestment in public transport in Scotland. We have only one underground system, which is in Glasgow and still shuts at 6 pm on Sundays, although I have been campaigning for an extension to that for 15 years. We have only one tram system.

We have had some notable expansions over the years, such as the creation of the Borders railway, which shows how popular rail has become, even though this Parliament agreed to the Borders rail line by just one vote. Use of the line shows the importance of rail to people in Scotland.

We do not need an expensive consultation programme to work out that the public want affordable fares. People want reliable services on buses and on trains. I think that we all agree that we must meet people's aspirations.

When I saw the presentation from ScotRail at the time, it seemed to me that the pilot of removal of peak fares was the result of the coincidence of the pandemic and the return to public ownership having brought about a sensible policy decision. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary has seen the data on the pilot or is still waiting to see it. I ask because I think that we are all desperate to see whether revenue streams have remained the same, which would justify continuation of that scheme. Can we really go back to having working people, or people who want to come to this city, spending almost £30 a day to travel between Glasgow and Edinburgh? I really do not want us to go back to that.

Electrification of the railways is important for zero carbon, but it has not changed the service for many communities. Where I live, people cannot get a train on Sunday before 11.15 am. We have not discussed Sunday services, but it is an important issue. I have raised it with ScotRail and the RMT, of which I declare that I am a member. Rail is a critical public service and it is critical to net zero. It is a difficult issue, but it has to be

addressed. There has to be a seven-days service—Sundays cannot be excluded.

The public like rail. It is accountable, mostly—and more so, now. It is timetabled, and it is quicker, in most cases.

I support guards being kept on ScotRail services, which Richard Leonard spoke about.

In 2019, I proposed a member's bill on young people's concessionary fares, because I felt that it was unfair that the fares that they pay automatically double when they turn 16. My bill was blocked at the last minute because the Parliament did not have the relevant powers, but it has them now. I would like to put that on the table. I am not arguing that the answer is to expand concessionary fares and have lots of them, but that group of people is worth our consideration.

Everyone has talked about integrated ticketing; I am really unclear about what is preventing it from happening. Do we need to buy some technology that we do not have? Is it a governance issue? We all agree that we are 20 years behind where we ought to be on that.

Fiona Hyslop: Having spoken to the chair of the national smart ticketing advisory board this week, I note that we are ahead on many aspects, but we are behind on, for example, barcodes, which are important for interoperability. We have regional integrated ticketing, but we need to get multimodal and national ticketing, which is exactly the work that the board has been tasked with. It is about procurement of a common standard that everybody can use.

Pauline McNeill: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Scottish Labour has pushed for and supports the SPT consultation on bus franchising. It is not a done deal, and we know that; it is only the start of a journey. Working with the 12 local authorities that are involved, we need to tackle the governance issues. That is not the answer in itself, though: we need a revolution in the service. Gordon MacDonald spoke about that to some degree. The service has to be accountable in the way that the train service is accountable. When a bus does not turn up, people need to know why it did not turn up and that it will turn up next time. We have not cracked that, at all. The public want to know that there is a frequent service and that, if they miss a bus, another one will be coming along.

It strikes me that hospital services are a priority area. We have legislated on the matter, but it is clear to me that, in any franchising, hospital services should be a high priority. I do not see why we could not offer that.

Although I agree with a lot of what John Mason said, I do not believe that the stick is the answer.

The answer is that buses must not be seen as a last resort; they must be seen as a choice. People need to be able to choose the bus because it suits their lifestyle. We can do a lot more to encourage people.

I want to say a bit about the Clyde metro project, which I have been pursuing for some time. It is the big transport ambition for the Glasgow city region. I have asked various questions and had various meetings about it, but it is clear to me that there is no financial commitment to the project. I do not know what type of project it is.

I am really concerned that the money that was allocated for the rail link to Glasgow airport has been reallocated and we are now the only city of our size in the whole of Europe that does not have such a rail link. A link that serves west central Scotland would give passengers a choice to use light rail to the airport. I do not think that it is sustainable for Glasgow to be left behind in that way.

We need to recognise the diversity of needs across Scotland. Claire Baker spoke about that. There are shift workers and hospitality workers who work after 12 pm or 1 in the morning who need reliable services. Some of them have to drive because they do not have such a service. The cross-party campaign in Glasgow helped to retain the night bus service.

We have a shortage of bus drivers. That issue has not been mentioned, but we need to address it.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Ms McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: In closing, I want to respond to Bob Doris—the pedestrian. Taxi services should be regarded as part of the public transport system. How many people have come off a train only to see their bus leaving the station when they need to be somewhere? People need to be able to rely on the bus and to have the choice of using a taxi, if they can afford it.

There is a lot that we agree on. We need the technology, we need ease of access to public transport, we need mixed modes of transport and we need to give people choices. If we make the right decisions, people will make those choices.

16:44

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the debate, which gives us an opportunity to discuss a key area of public policy in Scotland. I even promise to keep my contribution positive—for the most part.

Public transport is a matter of concern for many of our communities throughout Scotland. The

challenges are many, and rising costs in all areas of transport cause significant challenges for national and local government.

There is also a stark divide between rural and urban transport networks in terms of their needs, focus, challenges and delivery. Many people would argue that we need not one but two reviews—one for urban transport and one for rural transport. That is borne out by the lack of mention in the review document of rural communities, or of the difference between rural and urban networks. There are only two mentions of the word “rural” in the whole document. The first is in relation to the excellent example of a demand-responsive bus network in Moray. The second is in a small bullet point on page 23, which simply says that there should be

“a sustainable and available network of buses across the country,”

including

“in rural ... areas”.

However, there is no indication of how that should be achieved, nor of the particular challenges in our rural communities. I therefore welcome the cabinet secretary’s mention of rural issues in her opening remarks.

Mark Ruskell: Does Douglas Lumsden agree that it would make sense to roll out the flat-fares pilot in a rural area, as well as learning from the experience in Edinburgh?

Douglas Lumsden: I was just about to cover that point.

We welcome parts of the long-awaited review—which has taken three years, as Alex Rowley mentioned. We welcome the extension of the trial scrapping of peak rail fares. We welcome development of the proposal for a flat-fares pilot for buses, and we suggest to the Scottish Government that there should be at least two pilots—one rural and one urban—so that we can get a sense of viability and the impacts on bus usage in both settings.

The report also states:

“a number of local authorities have withdrawn their local concessionary travel schemes in recent years due to affordability concerns, further exacerbating geographical anomalies in access to schemes across Scotland.”

There should not be a postcode lottery, so I welcome the Government’s commitment to ensuring that schemes are Scotland-wide. However, schemes should take full account of rural communities and local travel patterns and must work hand in hand with local councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Colleagues from across the chamber have made interesting contributions. The cabinet

secretary mentioned help for people who are in most need, but most of the options in the report that are not being progressed might have done that. That is slightly disappointing.

Graham Simpson mentioned a desire for a 20 per cent reduction in car journeys. Making public transport more affordable is the only way to do that. It seems that there are a lot of pilots in the review, but there is nothing concrete. I will speak about technology later.

Alex Rowley, too, is disappointed by the review and the lack of actions. He spoke about five-year and 10-year planning. I agree with that. The resources that would make radical changes overnight are not available, but we, as a Parliament, should be able to provide the direction of travel that is needed.

Gordon MacDonald told us that he used to work for Lothian Buses. From his contribution today, I thought that he still did; it was a glowing report for the company. Sue Webber described the easy-to-understand fares structure on Lothian Buses. That is key. I often take the bus in Aberdeen, but I have no idea how much it costs me until I see my bank statement. Sue also took the opportunity to call again for a new railway station at Winchburgh.

Bob Doris described the host of tickets that can be purchased. Surely we can make things easier for people by doing something about that. He also called for better integration between trains and buses. That seems to be just common sense.

Richard Leonard mentioned complex train ticketing. I agree with what he said. It is often cheaper to buy a return ticket, even when the return leg will not be used, than it is to buy a single ticket. A lot of people do not realise that. In addition, as John Mason mentioned, split tickets are often cheaper. That does not seem to be right.

Richard Leonard also mentioned the sleeper service, which does not appear much in the report. If we are looking at making fares cheaper, maybe there should be more in it about the sleeper service.

I have a confession to make: I am a regular bus user. The biggest improvement that has got me on the bus has been increased use of technology—contactless payments and apps in which I can see live bus-times information. I no longer need to download a timetable or get to a bus stop and guess when the next bus is coming. Seeing on my phone where the bus is has really changed my habits.

However, we can still do more in terms of technology. Working out how much a journey will cost still seems to be a lottery; an app should tell us the cost when we plan a journey. There is also a need for better joined-up fares between different

modes of transport. We have heard that point from a lot of members today. The Government has a role to play in that, so it was good to hear the cabinet secretary mention it. We can all agree that we need a much more joined-up public transport system, with a fairer system of fares.

I remain concerned that the review does not take enough account of rural issues. I hope that the Government will acknowledge that there is a gap in the report, and work to remedy that.

We all agree that we need to get more people using public transport. For that to happen, we need to get the basics right. All modes of transport need to be clean, safe, affordable and fast.

16:50

Fiona Hyslop: I thank members from across the chamber for their thoughtful and constructive contributions to a debate on a subject that is truly fundamental to the everyday lives of people across the country. We have benefited from that more open debate.

As we have heard, the public transport system faces a number of challenges at this time. It has to recover passenger numbers in the wake of the pandemic and manage rising costs in the face of inflation and significant financial constraints that affect Government funders. Those funders make up the shortfall between the full costs of providing services and the revenue that is raised by fares in order to deliver reliable, affordable, accessible and available public transport—which, as we have heard, is the first choice for travel.

We rightly demand and expect a lot of our public transport system, because it is integral to getting us to where we want to get to and enabling our communities to thrive. I firmly see public transport as key to tackling poverty and unlocking opportunities that connect people to better-paid jobs and education. I also acknowledge that, in rural areas, public transport could have one of the biggest impacts on tackling rural poverty. As we heard, the future of public transport and our public transport system is also key to delivering our net zero ambitions by giving people a sustainable alternative to the private car for everyday journeys.

I will be frank: current financial constraints are hampering immediate, more radical and bold initiatives, but I really want to work with MSPs across the chamber to shape the public system that we all want and that the country needs. If we take those steps now, as we have heard from Alex Rowley, we can deliver something that is more fundamental in that approach.

I want to address as many of the contributions that we heard as I can.

Graham Simpson asked to be involved in the costings for the flat-fare pilot. I would be interested in talking to him about that. He raised a reasonable point about community transport, but it requires legislation in relation to section 19. Although that can be tackled, I would not see that as happening immediately, because of other legislative constraints. The budget bill for what he asked for would run into hundreds of millions of pounds, which is not immediately available. However, that does not mean that we cannot think about what we want and plan now for what we need.

In a very considered speech, Alex Rowley touched on the key issue of governance and governance structures; indeed, one of the recommendations is a review of governance structures. That started pre-pandemic, but we need to think seriously about what that means. Does it mean more devolution of powers to regional transport partnerships? How would councils feel about that? There are varying types of relationships—dare I say?—between councils and regional transport partnerships. Is that a solution? Let us have those discussions and look at those issues as part of the review.

Beatrice Wishart was perhaps a bit grudging in her support for what we are doing on the under-22s interisland issue. We just have to work out the mechanics of when and how we do that. When I sat on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, we certainly heard that strong call from young people and others. Beatrice Wishart has constantly raised with me the issues about NorthLink and shared cabins, but she knows that it is always a complex matter that is centred on the appropriateness of sharing with strangers and the risk elements relating to that.

Gordon MacDonald gave an informed and expert analysis of not only the positive aspects of Lothian Buses but some of its challenges. He was quite right to say that we also need investment in vehicles, infrastructure and, as other members also mentioned, technology. He said that on such issues we want to work with private bus operators, but their challenge is whether they will share the data that we would need to arrive at the national ticketing solutions that we might want to see.

Sue Webber spoke about the need for regional integrated ticketing, which I think all members touched on. I hope that I have explained that we are probably further on that journey than people realise. We do not have the simplification and intermodal connectivity that we all need, but we have experts working with us on those through the national smart ticketing advisory board.

Bob Doris put in a pitch for Glasgow to be a candidate for the fixed-price, fixed-fare pilot. He said—and he is quite right—that Glasgow's

system is almost fully integrated but that there is more to be done. He made a point about charging a pound on fares around events. He might find that the culture sector will want first dibs on that idea, but he made an important point about getting people to events. However, those mostly happen in the evenings and at weekends. That links to Pauline McNeill's point about Sunday and weekend services more generally. Bob Doris's point about family-friendly spaces was an important one. The free-fare Friday challenge is out there, and I am sure that it has been heard.

Kevin Stewart was right to remind us about the fiscal pressures that we face. If UK public spending continues to be at the level that it is, regardless of which party is in government, that will constrain what we might be able to do through consequentials in the future, which should be acknowledged. Mr Stewart also referenced Aberdeen. Aberdeenshire is a very good example of what can be done on bus travel. It has seen reductions of 25 per cent in journey times since the introduction of its bus lanes. Members received a briefing from First, which mentioned that it is waiving fares from points at the beginning of the bus lanes at weekends, and it has just announced that it is freezing fares. We need to look at commercial models that can work.

Mark Ruskell put in a bid for a rural and city analysis on the fixed-price, flat-fare pilot. We need to think about how we can get the best information that will help us to shape future issues.

Claire Baker made a fundamental point on how we should tackle poverty. That might also mean how we target our resources. Even with the removal of peak fares, many people cannot afford the train ticket prices that apply just now. Should subsidy be put there, or should it, for example, be put in the bus fare sector?

Douglas Lumsden: Many options are not being taken forward that would help in the example situation that the cabinet secretary mentioned. Why are they not being considered and costed?

Fiona Hyslop: Some of them concern financial arrangements and will require legislation, which means that we will not necessarily be able to do them immediately. There is a prioritisation issue. There is also an element of challenge. As I said, we are one of the few countries that have such a generous concessionary travel scheme—it is free—and we are maintaining it. However, if we load more on to that system, we will not necessarily be in a position to grow income from fare paying if we spend all our money on subsidising that concessionary travel. Therefore we have to grow income to help the situation, which is where the flat-fare system might have an opportunity to give us direction.

Pauline McNeill and John Mason spoke about having a simplified system, but they also referenced the importance of travel to healthcare. I assure members that I recently met the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, because, as Cabinet Secretary for Transport, I want to pursue the matter further.

There is more to be said on the issue. As constituency MSPs, we all know about the importance of public transport and that, when it does not work, complaints will come to us. However, we also have a responsibility to make it important in this Parliament—not in a one-off debate but continually. We all have a stake in the issue, and we all want to adapt to the challenges and changes that we see. That is why the Scottish Government is taking action now to ensure a sustainable and viable public transport system, by making considerable investment in a system that is better integrated, more accessible and available, and affordable for all.

I look forward to working with members across the chamber, stakeholders and delivery partners across the sector to realise that vision. I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I hope—and trust—that this conversation will continue.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-12702, on committee membership. I ask George Adam to move the motion on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Stephen Kerr as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.—[*George Adam*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-12702, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Stephen Kerr as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:00.

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