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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 22 May 2024

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

Portfolio Question Time

Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is wellbeing economy, net zero and energy. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Manufacturing

1. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to promote Scottish manufacturing. (S6O-03452)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): Through our making Scotland's future programme, we recognise how vital the manufacturing sector is to our economy. We promote that through investment that goes into supporting companies and the workforce. That includes our £75 million investment in the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and its manufacturing skills academy, as well as our advancing manufacturing challenge fund initiative, which continues to deliver free support to small and medium-sized businesses.

Skills Development Scotland has revised the apprenticeship frameworks for engineering to create more modern and flexible qualifications, and we recently held an engineering as a career event to encourage more young people into the sector.

Roz McCall: The minister will be aware that the recent Royal Bank of Scotland business activity index shows a 12th successive monthly decline in incomplete business, with Scottish manufacturers blaming that decline on a falling inflow of new orders.

Fife has a long and dynamic history of being at the leading edge of manufacturing and engineering, with businesses such as Normand and Thomson dating back to 1905. With the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister having pledged to get the economy "firing on all cylinders", what will the Scottish Government do to support manufacturing in my region and across Scotland that will actively boost the economy?

Tom Arthur: The member is absolutely correct to highlight the significant role that manufacturing plays in our economy. Indeed, it accounts for 173,000 jobs and more than half of Scotland's international exports. I completely agree with the importance that the member places on that in relation to her region and across Scotland.

We are committed to working constructively and in partnership with the sector to ensure that manufacturing is fully supported in Scotland and that we can realise our ambition for the country to become the home of manufacturing innovation.

I have already mentioned the £75 million of investment in the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and the significant investment that was provided through the advancing manufacturing challenge fund. We also look to engage constructively with a range of partners, including the United Kingdom Government, on the matter. In addition, the Scottish Government has a national innovation strategy, which sets out ambitions that will benefit the sector.

We will continue to engage constructively with the sector and other partners to ensure that we support a thriving, innovative and dynamic manufacturing sector. I am more than happy to engage with members on their ideas about how we can support manufacturing in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of supplementaries. I will try to take them all.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The head of high-value manufacturing at Scottish Enterprise has stated:

"The energy transition is the single biggest market opportunity for Scotland's manufacturers".

With the Scottish Government bringing vast opportunities to Scotland, such as the Sumitomo Electric Industries development, will the minister provide an update on the Government's efforts to incentivise growth and diversification in low-carbon technology in the Scottish manufacturing industry?

Tom Arthur: Thanks to the investment by the Scottish Government and our agencies, Scotland now has an extensive manufacturing support infrastructure to help companies to diversify and grow. Just last week, we announced £4 million of funding from the Government and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to support the establishment of the manufacturing innovation centre for Moray.

Our advancing manufacturing challenge fund has supported the establishment of 12 projects Scotland-wide, providing free support for SMEs. The National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and our innovation centre support firms in established sectors to achieve greater efficiency and provide

technological support to a range of projects in low-carbon emerging markets.

Our enterprise agencies' strategic plans also highlight their focus on growing and strengthening Scotland's supply chain companies' capacity to enter such markets.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The national shipbuilding strategy refresh was completed in March 2022. One of the key recommendations was to enhance the competitive position of financing for shipbuilding programmes. Although a home shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme has been introduced, there is still not a competitive product range on performance bonds and builders refund guarantees. Will the minister outline what the Scottish Government can do to promote greater competitiveness in shipbuilding financing in Scotland?

Tom Arthur: I appreciate the member's long-standing interest in that area. He will forgive me if I am not able to respond to him in detail at this point, but I assure him of the Scottish Government's strong interest in and commitment to engaging constructively in that area. In that spirit, I am more than happy to engage directly with the member.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The manufacturing sector is watching the delay to the Berwick Bank offshore wind farm. Getting investment and confidence in the sector depends on there being a swift process of consents. Ahead of the highly anticipated wave of applications for onshore and offshore projects, what confidence can the minister give me that we have sufficient capacity in consenting? In other words, how many vacancies do we have in that area?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the importance of the member's question in regard to our consenting regimes and the need to ensure that we have robust but efficient and speedy decision making. He will appreciate that it is not possible for me to comment on on-going and live applications. However, I assure him that the Scottish Government places considerable importance on that area and that it is committed to working constructively with partners to support an efficient and swift consenting regime in Scotland. The Government recognises the significant role that that plays for individual projects and in ensuring long-term investor confidence.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I recently heard from a manufacturing business in my constituency that it is looking overseas to expand, purely due to the way in which United Kingdom immigration policy has hindered the recruitment and retention of skilled employees. What work is the Scottish Government doing to

help manufacturing businesses recruit the staff that are needed to meet growing demands?

Tom Arthur: Scotland's migration service, which was launched in March, supports businesses to navigate the immigration system, including by providing advice from qualified advisers.

We are working with our partners, including Skills Development Scotland, to emphasise the opportunities and higher average salaries in this highly skilled sector. Recent examples include the funding of a pilot to ensure that people who apply for opportunities with large companies and are initially unsuccessful are redirected to smaller companies in the sector with recruitment needs. We also sponsored a recent event that was designed to boost educators' knowledge of a modern and rewarding career in manufacturing.

Household Recycling Targets

2. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what elements it has identified that led to it not meeting its household recycling targets in 2013 and 2020. (S6O-03453)

The Minister for Climate Action (Gillian Martin): Analysis of factors influencing recycling targets was published with the circular economy and waste route map consultation in 2022. The most significant driver of performance that was identified was recyclable waste being thrown away. In response, our £70 million recycling improvement fund is delivering modernised services and increasing the quality and quantity of recycling across Scotland. The overall recycling rate in Scotland is at its highest level since records began in 2011.

Our draft circular economy and waste route map and the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill aim to modernise recycling services and make recycling easier for householders in order to address that very issue.

Maurice Golden: I thank the minister for that answer, but let us remember the facts. According to the Scottish National Party, household recycling was supposed to be at 50 per cent in 2013 and 60 per cent in 2020. I have a simple question: in what year will the 50 per cent target be met?

Gillian Martin: Mr Golden is right to point to that. The household recycling rate is at around 42 per cent at the moment. The overall recycling rate in Scotland as a whole is 62.3 per cent.

Across these islands, the Welsh have the best recycling rates in the UK, and their approach is informed by much of what is in the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill. Their approach gave more powers to local authorities to address

household contamination and set targets for councils. I am in close, regular contact with the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs for Wales, Huw Irranca-Davies. Indeed, he is working with me and UK Government and Northern Ireland ministers on the game-changer in waste collection, which is a UK-wide deposit return scheme.

We might want to reflect that, if our DRS in Scotland had started in March, as it was supposed to, 80 per cent of drinks containers would have been recycled this year, rising to 90 per cent next year. That would have made a huge impact on our waste recycling targets. Let us let the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill go through, and let us work with other UK nations to get a DRS back on track.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): In Scotland, overall recycling rates are at their highest ever. Can the minister detail how the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill, which she referenced in her previous answer, will help to meet our ambitions?

Gillian Martin: I thank Ms Haughey for pointing that out. She is right—the figure is 62.3 per cent—but there is an awful lot more that we can do. Progress has been made on household recycling, which is why the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill and draft circular economy and waste route map set out further measures to improve and modernise local recycling. That includes working in collaboration with local authorities and households to design new statutory standards for recycling, to create a more consistent and easy-to-use service across Scotland. The bill will help us to achieve our ambitions for a circular economy and drive up reuse and recycling rates. I am willing to work with any member across the chamber on how we can make that more robust.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I will try one more time. When will the 2013 household recycling targets be met?

Gillian Martin: The point about the targets that were set in 2013 or 2014 is that the Climate Change Committee has recommended an approach of having targets for separate waste streams and carbon-based metrics. The new targets may include consumption, reducing waste, reuse and local recycling, as well as material-based and emission-based targets. That is a far better and more detailed approach than we previously had.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Wood-burning Stoves (Restrictions on Installation)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had and will have with rural communities, such as residents and businesses in the Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale constituency, regarding the restrictions on the installation of wood-burning stoves. (S6O-03455)

The Minister for Climate Action (Gillian Martin): The new-build heat standard currently applies only to new buildings and certain conversions. Wood-burning stoves can still be installed to provide emergency heating where justified, recognising the unique needs of rural and island communities. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy wrote to Ms Grahame recently to confirm that we are taking seriously the concerns that Ms Grahame and others have raised. Obviously, I am new in this post. We are urgently reviewing the position in light of those concerns and ensuring that we work with and communicate with all concerned parties, including businesses, as we do so. I believe that I have already said that I would go to Ms Grahame's constituency to speak to one such business.

Christine Grahame: Thank you very much, minister. I had forgotten that I had invited you—I am glad that you reminded me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, Ms Grahame—unless the invitation is extended to me.

Christine Grahame: I beg your pardon, Presiding Officer. I should know better.

I am glad that the minister reminded me that I had invited the minister to visit my constituency.

I refer to the letter of 16 May that the minister referred to, which responded to various concerns that I had. To quote it:

“I would like to reassure you that we have heard the concerns raised recently ... and we are taking these fully on board.”

It seems that, with fresh people in post in the Government, we may very well be doing that. Therefore, I again ask the minister to come round my constituency with me—that is a second invitation, which not many people get from me—to evidence the log piles that are stacked beside cottages in the villages. Logs are cheap and accessible locally. The minister can reach out and understand the impact that there would have been had wood-burning stoves been banned—I appreciate that it was not a complete ban—for usage in areas where they are essential.

Gillian Martin: Christine Grahame makes a good point about sustainable supply of fuels for these forms of heating. I assure her that I take very seriously the concerns that she and many others have raised. I am happy to reiterate the commitment to urgently review our position, which was made in the letter of 16 May. Again, I accept that second invitation to go to the member's constituency. Meaningful dialogue with those affected, particularly in relation to the concerns that have been raised by island and rural communities, will be key to that review. I want to involve individuals and businesses in that. I want to respond to the many pieces of correspondence that I have had from members across the chamber on the issue.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My motion that will be debated next week recognises the importance of wood-burning stoves in the rural and island communities that the minister mentioned. Those stoves are often the only source of heat and hot water when power is lost. The Scottish National Party's ban could leave vulnerable households and communities isolated and at greater risk, as well as worsening high levels of fuel poverty. The measure has cross-party support, including from Christine Grahame and the current Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes. Does the minister accept that the Scottish Government has got this wrong from the very start? Will she commit today to reversing the SNP's ban on wood-burning stoves?

Gillian Martin: It is really important that I correct Jamie Halcro Johnston: there is not a ban on wood-burning stoves.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: There is. It is an effective ban.

Gillian Martin: There are new regulations in place, and I know that Mr Halcro Johnston knows that. I look forward to responding on behalf of the Government in that debate next week.

I know how people who live in rural constituencies heat their homes—I am from a rural constituency—which is why, initially, I liaised with the minister responsible at the time on the fact that a lot of homes have such stoves for secondary use or for use in an emergency situation. I am committed to taking on board a lot of the correspondence that has come my way on the issue and to looking at how we ensure that rural communities are not disproportionately affected by what we do.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to hear the minister commit to urgently reviewing the issue. Constituents have reached out to me who are genuinely unsure whether they can continue with planned builds, and housing associations and councils are

similarly uncertain about what the policy will mean for them. Given that contradictory information is circulating, clear messaging from the Government is necessary to reassure rural and island residents. Can urgent reassurances be given to those who are in the process of building green homes that depend on wood-burning stoves—a renewable and sustainable source of heating—and those who hope to build such homes in the future?

Gillian Martin: Emma Roddick makes a good point about sustainability and about biomass being used for heating in rural areas. Buildings that are currently under construction with a building warrant prior to 1 April are unaffected by the regulations. For new warrants after 1 April, as it stands, direct emission heating systems, including wood-burning stoves, can still be installed to provide emergency heating, when that can be justified.

I acknowledge that it can be difficult to reconcile the current guidance with the nature of wood-burning stoves, which are often installed for more frequent use rather than just for emergencies. I am actively working to address those concerns and am actively considering how we can give better direction in that area. I will work with all concerned parties to ensure that I address those concerns.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 was not lodged.

National Planning Framework (Impacts on Energy Policy)

6. **Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding any plans to review any unintended impacts of the fourth national planning framework on energy policy. (S6O-03457)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Màiri McAllan): Planning and consenting are key to realising the enormous social and economic benefits of our energy transition and net zero journey. Therefore, I regularly discuss those issues with my ministerial colleagues, including, most recently, this morning, when I, together with the Minister for Climate Action and the Minister for Public Finance—who are with me in the chamber—met senior officials to discuss a range of related matters, including how we ensure that our planning system can protect our natural environment on the one hand and be a key enabler of decarbonisation and green economic growth on the other, and, crucially, how our communities can be supported and empowered in that respect.

Following the adoption of NPF4 in 2023, we are monitoring its implementation and taking action to support the application of its policies in practice.

Elena Whitham: Although I fully appreciate the broader intention behind NPF4's energy policy principles and our move towards a just transition, many of my constituents have brought to my attention the cumulative effect of a high volume of wind farms, such as the five that are proposed in the north Carrick area alone, with turbine heights in excess of 200m. Can the cabinet secretary explain how NPF4 allows my constituents to raise the impact that that might have on their communities, their amenities, private water supplies and, indeed, local biodiversity? How can we ensure that local voices are heard?

Màiri McAllan: NPF4, which is more the domain of the Minister for Public Finance than it is mine, makes it clear that the impacts on communities, nature and other things, including the cumulative impact, which Ms Whitham is absolutely right to mention, are important considerations in the decision-making process. All applications for site-specific developments will be considered and assessed, and I reiterate that local communities must always have their say.

We are aware that some communities are experiencing an intensification of renewable energy development proposals. Our planning officials have been engaging with communities across Scotland to support better collaborative working. We are also calling on the United Kingdom Government to make changes to modernise Scotland's consenting regime under the UK Electricity Act 1989. That would, among other things, require pre-application community engagement to become mandatory, which I think Ms Whitham's constituents would welcome. We have written to all parties offering the opportunity to work with the Scottish Government in pursuit of that aim.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 was not lodged.

Retail Sales (Support)

8. **Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to support businesses to address reported declining retail sales. (S6O-03459)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): Our retail strategy sets out how we will work with businesses and trade unions to deliver a strong and prosperous retail sector in line with the vision of the national strategy for economic transformation. The strategy sets out a clear vision for a retail sector in Scotland that is successful, resilient, sustainable and profitable. It seeks to build on retail's strengths and maximise

opportunities for the sector to fulfil its potential and contribute to our economic transformation.

Annie Wells: The Scottish Retail Consortium said that retail across all sectors in Scotland has seen a drop in sales on a year-on-year basis since April. Food sales dropped by 3 per cent and non-food sales, excluding online sales, decreased by 4.9 per cent. Given that the Scottish National Party has refused to pass on business rates relief, what specific support can the minister and the Scottish Government give to our local retailers?

Tom Arthur: On the specific point about non-domestic rates, I first highlight the considerable support that the Government provides through non-domestic rates relief, which is valued at some £685 million this year, from an estimated revenue of £3.1 billion. Specifically, a significant proportion of that goes towards the small business bonus scheme, which the member knows is a significantly generous scheme from which many retailers benefit.

More broadly, retail is not immune from the significant economic pressures that we have been facing, whether that is the broader cost of living crisis or the response to the significant inflation that we have seen. That is thankfully now reducing significantly, but it has led to significant rises in interest rates, which will have an effect in the form of depressing consumer spending.

However, we are committed to continuing to work constructively with the retail sector. Yes, we recognise that regulation and fiscal powers and taxation play an important part, but we must work more broadly to recognise consumers' changing habits with regard to the channels that they use to access retail, and we should not look at retail and policy in isolation but see it in a holistic way that aligns with our broader aspirations around town centre and local living, for example.

I am very much looking forward to taking up my responsibilities around retail, and I pay tribute to my predecessor, Joe FitzPatrick, and the role that he undertook in taking forward the retail strategy. I am committed to working constructively with all members and the wider sector to ensure that we have a prosperous and flourishing retail sector in Scotland.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the minister share my concern that the UK Government's refusal to substantially raise the threshold at which businesses pay VAT is leading to ever greater numbers of small businesses being forced into VAT registration? Despite cumulative inflation of 32 per cent since 2017, the threshold of £85,000 was frozen for seven years until a paltry raise to £90,000 was carried out as part of this year's UK budget. Of course, that has a very adverse impact on our

businesses. Does he also agree that the suggestion by Labour Party advisers that the threshold should be lowered to £50,000 is not only damaging to business but downright irresponsible?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to answer on those matters for which he is responsible.

Tom Arthur: As is implicit in your much-valued advice, Deputy Presiding Officer, the UK Government retains the majority of the tax policy levers to boost much-needed economic growth. I would insist that it ensures that the increase to the VAT registration threshold that was introduced in April this year needs to provide value for money and give businesses the long-term assurances and certainty that they need to support economic growth. Therefore, we will continue to call on the UK Government to provide businesses with the support that they need to protect jobs and the economy.

However, the better solution would be that powers over VAT and the broader fiscal levers, which are currently in the hands of the UK Government, be devolved to this Parliament so that we can more holistically and effectively put in place policy measures that will support our economy and our economic needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes portfolio questions on the wellbeing economy, net zero and energy. Before we move to questions on the next portfolio, there will be a brief pause to allow those on the front benches to change positions.

Finance, Deputy First Minister Responsibilities and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is finance, deputy first minister responsibilities and parliamentary business. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Fiscal Framework

1. **Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the impact of the updated fiscal framework. (S6O-03460)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The forthcoming medium-term financial strategy will provide an update on the fiscal outlook and will reflect the impact of changes agreed to the fiscal framework, including the Scottish Government's latest borrowing and reserve policies.

The Scottish Government has postponed publication of this year's MTFS in order to allow time for the incoming First Minister to take a view on critical policy issues and to align the fiscal strategy with the Government's wider policy priorities. The MTFS will now be published on 20 June.

Ash Regan: Recent analysis from the House of Commons library paints a very concerning picture, and suggests that Scotland's block grant will consist of just 3.5 per cent of the United Kingdom's Government spending in 2023-24 and 2024-25, according to autumn statement plans. Does the Government agree that that underscores the need for a detailed explanation of how the fiscal framework affects Scotland's block grant and the overall fiscal autonomy of our country? Is it not time for a thorough review of the fiscal framework and the reprioritising of delivering independence to ensure that future Scottish Governments have all the fiscal levers of a normal country?

Shona Robison: It is no secret that the Scottish Government's preference was for a broadly scoped review that explored opportunities for further devolution. Our position on full fiscal powers and independence is there for everybody to see. However, the improvements that we made were important. The set of improvements to the fiscal framework is sensible and proportionate and provides the Scottish Government with more effective levers to manage risk and volatility. It also ensures that we are able to lock in the index per capita model, which will result in Scottish public finances being better to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds over the next few years, compared with what they would have been.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementaries. I will try to get them all in, but they will need to be brief.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned the index per capita method, which I think John Swinney, in his previous role, achieved. Will she confirm that we could be in a much worse position if we did not have the index per capita methodology?

Shona Robison: Yes. The fiscal framework review was very limited in its scope and nature. Given that it was a negotiation, the ability to expand that was very limited. However, John Mason's point is that the index per capita mechanism has significantly benefited the Scottish budget, because it ensures that the budget is protected from the risk of slower population growth in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK. Without the levers over aspects such as migration, it is very difficult to turn that around.

The authors of the independent report, which informed the review of the fiscal framework,

estimated that, by 2026-27, the benefit for income tax alone could rise to around £500 million a year relative to the Treasury's preferred methodology.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary was very clear at the Finance and Public Administration Committee and in the chamber that the fiscal framework has yielded a set of changes that are

“fair and pragmatic and will strengthen the financial management levers available to the Scottish Government”.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the fiscal framework is very valuable to Scotland and shows good joint working between the Scottish and UK Governments?

Shona Robison: I said at the time that, given the limitations of the review, it was fair and pragmatic. Although we would have liked—and will continue to seek, particularly if there is a change of Government—a more fundamental review of the fiscal framework, the index per capita mechanism alone was very important. I mentioned to John Mason the benefit of, potentially, £500 million a year relative to the Treasury's preferred methodology. We should all welcome that. The fiscal framework could be further improved, and we will pursue that with the new Government.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): In a debate last December, the ultra-nationalist Alba party described the fiscal framework as “a trap”. Does the cabinet secretary think that an additional £2,200 per head of public spending in Scotland is a trap, or does it help to sustain core public services?

Shona Robison: Scottish revenues, through personal and business taxation, contribute to the whole of the United Kingdom. The idea that, somehow, Scotland is subsidised is not a proposition that I support. Scotland more than pays our share, not least when we look at the revenues from energy that have flowed to the UK Government over many years. The point of the fiscal framework was to recognise that, while we are under the current constitutional arrangements, there is a risk of slower population growth in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK. I hope that Labour will join us in furnishing the Scottish Government with the powers over population growth, such as migration. We would be keen to work with any future UK Government to have a migration system that suits the needs of the Scottish economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If we are going to get in all the supplementaries, the questions and responses will need to be a bit briefer.

Ethical Procurement

2. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it promotes ethical procurement processes across the public sector to embed principles such as fair work and sustainability, including in the college and university sector. (S6O-03461)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Scottish public sector buyers are encouraged to consider economic, social and environmental factors systematically through use of the national sustainable procurement tools, associated guidance and training. The tools have been designed to help public bodies to comply with policy and legislation, including a focus on ethical procurement and the recently updated fair work first in procurement guidance. The Scottish Government's procurement policy and guidance encourages consideration of ethical requirements on a case-by-case basis in a way that is relevant and proportionate to each procurement, enabling buyers to do what will have the greatest impact for a particular contract

Bob Doris: PJ's Foods employs around 100 workers in Maryhill and it is a living wage and living hours employer. The company has informed me that it is disadvantaged by a United Kingdom-wide higher education procurement framework—the University Caterers Organisation framework—and how it may be interpreted by Scottish universities. Consequently, a company that is not a living wage company now makes a daily 400-mile round trip from Bradford to Glasgow to fulfil a university catering contract for sandwiches, generating some 124,800 food miles and 50,000 kg of carbon dioxide emissions each year. I ask the minister to meet me and PJ's Foods and to visit the company to discuss how the TUCO procurement framework disadvantages Scottish businesses that do not supply products in other parts of the UK, and how that process can be improved.

Ivan McKee: I would be delighted to accompany Bob Doris to meet the supplier in question and I thank him for bringing the issue to my attention. Although public bodies are responsible for their own procurement decisions, I have asked officials to look into the issues that Mr Doris has raised so that we can understand them more fully. Since 2009, Advanced Procurement for Universities and Colleges, which is the procurement centre of expertise for the Scottish university and college sector, has worked to specify requirements on menu plans that are based on freshness, the use of seasonal food and flexible and frequent delivery times. It has taken steps, including dividing frameworks into

geographical lots, to encourage the active participation of small and local businesses.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As the minister will know, local work is supported by public procurement as much as possible. As Bob Doris mentioned, we can reduce the number of miles from manufacture to use, which is important for climate change. What will the Scottish Government do to encourage and support local public procurement?

Ivan McKee: I am sure that Mr Whittle will be aware of the annual report on procurement that is produced by Scottish Government officials on behalf of the public sector across Scotland, which is a requirement of our procurement legislation. The report indicates that more than half of the £16 billion that is available was spent with Scottish companies and more than half of that was spent with small local businesses. The amount of orders that were placed locally and with small businesses in Scotland is far in excess of the equivalent number for the rest of the UK as a whole or the European benchmark. We will continue to make progress to ensure that more orders are going to small and local businesses, and we will work to take a range of steps to encourage and support that. The data will be in our public procurement reports.

United Kingdom Economy

3. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is regarding Scotland's budgetary forecast to reports that the UK economy officially exited a recession and outperformed the first quarter of 2024 forecast of the Bank of England. (S6O-03462)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): It is very welcome news that the United Kingdom has exited recession—a recession that Scotland avoided—but it is important to temper that with the recognition that the UK as a whole still faces significant challenges, with gross domestic product per person falling in the past year and borrowing ending the year higher than forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility. There is no sign of any improvement for our budget, which remains about £400 million lower in real terms than it was in 2022-23 as a result of the UK Government's decision to prioritise tax cuts over investment in public services.

Pam Gosal: Although we are all glad to see the UK Government pull out of recession, we must ensure that the Scottish economy continues to grow. Leading industry figures such as Sandy Begbie from Scottish Financial Enterprise have warned that increasing income taxes could make it more difficult for talented workers to move to Scotland. Now that the anti-growth extremist

Greens are out of government, will the minister ensure that economic growth is placed at the heart of Scottish Government policy? Will he rule out an increase in income taxes?

Tom Arthur: I would not describe any colleagues in the chamber as extremists. That is an important point that I want to put on the record.

As the member will be aware, we face an exceptionally challenging set of fiscal circumstances. Because of cumulative decisions that have been taken about the Scottish budget, we have £1.5 billion more in revenue to spend on public services—to invest in our health service, local government, the criminal justice system, enterprise agencies and others—that we simply would not have had if we had followed the UK Government's policies.

We recognise that it is important to have a balanced and proportionate tax policy, and we recognise the importance of ensuring that Scotland remains an attractive destination for those who are on high salaries. I am sure that the member will welcome the recently published data and analysis that show net positive migration to Scotland from the rest of the UK, and that is across all tax bands in the most recent year for which we have data.

We absolutely recognise the importance of economic growth and—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I am going to have to take a supplementary from Kenneth Gibson.

Tom Arthur: —our policies will reflect that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The UK economy is smaller and living standards are lower than they were at the start of the parliamentary session—the first time that that has ever happened. Does the minister agree that it is a sign of increasing desperation from the Tories that they consider it a cause for celebration that the UK economy has stopped shrinking, when growth is still lower than it is in Europe, Asia, the Americas or Australia, as we continue to pay the price of Brexit and Tory economic incompetence?

Tom Arthur: The latest figures show that, despite a small increase in the latest quarter, UK GDP per person is down by 0.7 per cent on the past year. The UK Government needs to face up to the fact that its actions are making the UK poorer, with the National Institute of Economic and Social Research estimating that Brexit has reduced the size of the UK economy by 2.5 per cent. The UK Government's poor decision making, typified by Brexit and its immigration policy, means that the Scottish Government must work even harder within its limited powers to help businesses and workers to thrive.

Carbon Emissions Land Tax

4. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its commitment to consult on the introduction of a carbon emissions land tax for large landowners. (S6O-03463)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is committed to reducing emissions from all sectors, including land, which was highlighted by the Climate Change Committee's recent report. We will set out our approach for achieving that in the summer, and carbon taxes will form part of those considerations.

Mark Ruskell: The cabinet secretary might be aware that the John Muir Trust has estimated that maximising carbon sequestration in forests and peatlands could lead to emissions savings of more than 6 million tonnes of carbon, which is the same as taking 4 million cars off our roads. However, it is clear that we have been too slow to realise that potential, which is yet another reason why Scotland has missed nine out of the last 12 climate targets. Following the consultation period during the summer, will the cabinet secretary commit to introducing legislation at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that it is passed before the end of this parliamentary session?

Shona Robison: I acknowledge what Mark Ruskell said about the John Muir Trust. The proposal for a carbon emissions land tax is one of the options that merit consideration. It should be looked at alongside all potential fiscal and regulatory options to reduce emissions from Scotland's land.

I am not able to give information on the timeline, but I assure Mark Ruskell that I will update Parliament once that has been established and we have more information to share. I am happy to keep him posted.

Block Grant Changes (Impact on Capital Budget)

5. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the reduction in Scotland's capital budget as a result of changes to Scotland's block grant. (S6O-03464)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Our block grant for capital is expected to reduce in real terms by about 9 per cent by 2027-28, which represents a cumulative loss of more than £1.3 billion. In addition, our financial transactions allocation has been reduced by 62 per cent since 2022-23, which amounts to a reduction of £290 million. That means that we will have to continue to make tough decisions to reprioritise our infrastructure pipeline

to ensure that it is affordable and deliverable and that it provides the best value for money.

Clare Haughey: Westminster is set to cut Scotland's capital budget by almost 9 per cent in real terms over the next five years, which will have a significant impact on my constituency. For example, there will be less funding available to build affordable homes, and South Lanarkshire Council will continue to refuse to build a much-needed high school to serve communities such as Newton Farm, Drumsagard village and Halfway. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is deeply concerning that a potential Labour United Kingdom Government is signing up to public spending cuts, doubling down on Tory austerity and further restricting Scotland's capital spending power?

Shona Robison: The real-terms cuts that our capital budget faces are significantly impacting on our ability to deliver much-needed infrastructure investment, whether that is in Clare Haughey's constituency or across Scotland. I called on the UK Government to increase investment in capital projects and to release Barnett consequentials for devolved Governments, but the spring statement provided no additional capital funding.

I hope that everyone in the chamber agrees that it is absolutely imperative that whoever forms the next UK Government after the UK election changes course, reverses the cuts to capital spending and invests for the future. If they do not, they will be held accountable for that loss of capital investment.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I recognise those cuts, but the reduction in inflation has released the pressure on capital spending—in factual terms, an additional £229 million is available as a result of that reduction. Will the cabinet secretary set out what that additional spend will be allocated to? What are the Government's priorities?

Shona Robison: The infrastructure investment pipeline will be set out, alongside the medium-term financial strategy, on 20 June. That is when we will set out to Parliament how we will use the capital budget that is available to us and what other levers we will use.

Ardeer Peninsula (Revocation of Special Development Order)

6. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the implementation of the fourth national planning framework specifically in relation to revocation of the special development order at the Ardeer peninsula. (S6O-03465)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): We are continuing our programme of work to implement the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. We remain committed to implementing its provisions, including those relating to compensation on revocation of a development order. When my predecessor, Joe FitzPatrick, met Ruth Maguire late last year, he acknowledged that resources had necessarily been focused on preparation of the national planning framework, but that we would look to take forward the work in question later this year, and that remains the case.

Ruth Maguire: I thank the minister for that update. The sand dune system at Ardeer has been destroyed for commercial gain. I understand the specific and complex circumstances around planning in Ardeer. Will the minister meet me to discuss the matter further, with a view to having a solution that will ease the concerns of my constituents in Stevenston?

Ivan McKee: I would be happy to take up Ruth Maguire's offer of a meeting to discuss the matter, which I know is very important to her and her constituents.

Private Finance Initiative Debt Obligations (Impact on Local Authority Budgets)

7. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work has been conducted to assess any impact of repaying private finance initiative debt obligations on local authority budgets. (S6O-03466)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): PFI was an expensive mistake by successive Labour and Conservative Governments that simply did not deliver best value for the people of Scotland, and the repayment of which places significant pressure on council budgets.

For context, the total estimated payments for local authority PFIs over the lifetime of the contracts is more than £15 billion, which is around 4.7 times higher than the estimated capital value of the projects involved.

James Dornan: Glasgow City Council paid £61 million last year in PFI repayments, and that will continue for many years to come. We also have the unforgivable impact of Labour's equal pay scandal, which will cost the same city around £30 million per year for the next three decades.

When the council entered into those PFI contracts, Labour was in power at council level, in Holyrood and at Westminster. Given the financial vandalism of PFI to local authorities, can the cabinet secretary assure me that the Scottish Government will never return to that calamitous model? Does she agree that that is a clear

reminder of why the people of Scotland should never again trust Labour with the reins of power?

Shona Robison: I absolutely agree with James Dornan. The Conservative and Labour PFI models were an expensive mistake that simply did not deliver best value for the people of Scotland. In taking forward alternative funding models, the Scottish Government will ensure that best value for the people of Scotland is at the forefront of the decisions that it makes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have another portfolio question before we move to the next item of business. I would appreciate it if members on the front benches did not have a conversation across the chamber.

Block Grant Changes (Impact on Local Authority Funding)

8. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the reduction in Scotland's revenue budget as a result of changes to the block grant has had on funding allocations to local authorities in the current financial year. (S6O-03467)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The United Kingdom Government has failed to deliver for Scotland at successive fiscal events. When more support is desperately needed for public services, Scotland's block grant from the UK Government is less in real terms in 2024-25 than it was in 2022-23.

Despite sustained UK Government cuts, the Scottish Government has increased local government's share of the budget and the 2024-25 budget delivered record funding of more than £14 billion to councils, which the independent Accounts Commission has recently confirmed represents a real-terms increase and follows real-terms increases in both 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Bill Kidd: The UK Government has cut Scotland's capital grant by 16.1 per cent. That is the reality that we have to live with. As Labour's Wes Streeting recently said,

"All roads lead back to Westminster."

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is imperative that all parties in this Parliament accept that reality and come together to speak as one in calling for an end to public service cuts, given the impact that those have on the money allocated to Scotland?

Shona Robison: I am pleased that Labour's Wes Streeting has recognised the reality of the situation. I am sure that his Labour colleagues here will recognise that, whether it comes to health funding or funding for local government, as it

impacts the Welsh Labour Government, so it impacts the Scottish Government.

I am sure that, from now on, we will hear a lot in the chamber about Wes Streeting's realisation of the reality that all roads lead back to Westminster.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I have a practical suggestion. Glasgow City Council has almost £0.5 billion in lender option borrower option—LOBO—loans, which run at rates of about 7 to 9 per cent, which is far higher than the Public Works Loan Board rate. A similar debt renegotiation to that done by Newham London Borough Council could save Glasgow City Council £450 million, or £11 million per year. Could that be an option for the Scottish Government to help broker debt renegotiation, cancellation and amnesties across Scottish local government?

Shona Robison: The lending policies and the debt that local authorities have need to be responsible, affordable and sustainable. We engage regularly with councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that that is the case.

The fiscal framework that we are taking forward with COSLA will look at all matters that relate to the affordability and sustainability of local government's finances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on finance, Deputy First Minister responsibilities and parliamentary business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow speakers on the front benches to change.

Priorities for Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on priorities for Scotland. The First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:50

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome this opportunity to set out the approach that I intend to take in leading the Scottish Government. I want to take forward measures that will help people and their families to get on in life and to enable the people of Scotland to live happier, healthier lives.

One of the benefits of long service in the Parliament is that I have witnessed it when it is functioning at its very best. That happens when we work constructively together. At the beginning of my period as First Minister, let me make it clear to Parliament that I will work with any party that comes forward with ideas about how we can make our country a better place to live in. A good idea is a good idea. I make it clear to all parties and to all members that the Government will engage positively in considering ideas from all sources.

I may have been out of ministerial office for the past year, but I am no stranger to government. I therefore want to build on the record of the Scottish National Party Government over the past 17 years, which has changed Scotland for the better. Our task today is to look to the future. That future should be built on the foundations of working day in, day out for the people whom we serve.

Since the Government took office, economic growth per head and productivity have been stronger in Scotland than they have been in the rest of the United Kingdom. Scotland has had the best-performing accident and emergency core units in the UK for nine years. National health service funding has more than doubled, and we have the highest number of general practitioners per head in the United Kingdom.

On housing, since we were elected, Scotland has seen more than 40 per cent more affordable homes delivered per head of population than England has, and more than 70 per cent more than Wales has.

When we took office, renewable technologies generated the equivalent of 20.2 per cent of Scotland's gross electricity consumption. Since then, that has soared to an astonishing 113 per cent.

The number of schools in “good” or “satisfactory” condition has increased from just over 60 per cent to more than 90 per cent, and we are seeing record levels of literacy and numeracy at primary school level.

Since we took office, the amount of free childcare that is available to parents has increased from 412.5 hours to 1,140 hours, and we have extended that to eligible two-year-olds.

Recorded crime has fallen by around 40 per cent to one of its lowest levels in half a century.

This year, using our limited social security powers, measures such as the Scottish child payment are helping to keep an estimated 100,000 children in Scotland out of relative poverty.

I would be the first to accept that there are challenges to overcome for the Government, but a substantial discussion about how we take forward the agenda to improve the lives of people in Scotland must start with an acknowledgement of the improvements that have already been made.

In setting out my approach to government, I am acutely aware of the economic and fiscal realities that we face. If we are to make progress, I hope and believe that we can find consensus on that.

In that spirit of consensus, let me put on record my strong agreement with recent statements made by members of the Labour Party. Earlier this year, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Cabinet Office, Rebecca Evans, described the decisions taken in this year’s budget in Wales as the “starkest and most painful” since devolution. I absolutely sympathise with that situation.

There is a developing consensus on where responsibility for those funding decisions ultimately lies. In a broadcast interview on Sunday, the shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, was asked to explain the performance of the NHS in Wales. He replied:

“All roads do lead to Westminster, because, even though this is devolved, decisions taken in Westminster have an impact on the NHS across the whole country.”

That comment from Wes Streeting demonstrates the source of the significant financial challenges that we face. The prolonged era of austerity that has been delivered by the UK Government over the past 14 years is having a profound effect on the fiscal context in which we operate.

An additional factor that shapes the economic and fiscal context that we have to navigate is Brexit. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests that the UK economy was 2.5 per cent smaller in 2023 than it would

have been if the United Kingdom had retained European Union membership. On that basis, £69 billion could have been wiped from national income in 2023. That equates to £28 billion of tax revenue across the United Kingdom. With the same level of borrowing and taxation, that means that, without Brexit, devolved spending power for vital public services such as the NHS could have been £1.6 billion higher than it is today.

I recognise that it is the Scottish Government’s responsibility to deliver public services in Scotland, and I recognise the importance of Parliament in scrutinising our record and our plans. However, as we wrestle with those challenges, I hope that we will also see some recognition from across the chamber that the context in which we work is significantly affected by Westminster austerity and the damage of Brexit.

In my view, there is a very simple answer to that challenge, and that is Scotland being able to chart her own course economically and to make the best decisions on our own terms. For me, that would involve rejoining the European Union as an independent country and making our own economic decisions. Making that argument will be at the heart of my Government’s agenda. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: However, those opportunities and powers are not at our disposal today, so we must take forward our priorities in the current economic and fiscal context.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will update Parliament on our expectations of the financial position, but I can say to Parliament that the cumulative effect of the high inflation that we have experienced, austerity and Brexit is placing enormous financial pressure on the resources that are available to the Government, and that will have an effect on the priorities that we can deliver.

With that important context, I will outline the four priorities that will guide my Government’s decisions on policy and budget—the four priorities around which I will work to secure cross-party support for the good of the people of Scotland.

My first priority is to eradicate child poverty—not tackle or reduce child poverty, but eradicate it. That will be the single most important objective of my Government and my Cabinet, because child poverty stunts the progress of any nation, and it stands in the way of social justice and economic growth. My Cabinet will do everything in our power—including listening to and working with members across the chamber—to achieve our aim.

The Scottish child payment is a significant step forward. It is one of the most impactful measures in the effort to eradicate child poverty. However, I recognise that we need to do more. Last week, I confirmed the opening of a £1.5 million fund to support councils in removing school meal debt from families across the country. That will help to ensure that no child is penalised because their family struggled to pay for school meals during a cost of living crisis.

The Government recognises that one of the most effective ways of tackling child poverty is by enabling parents and carers to enter sustainable employment. We will look to deliver further measures that will support families to enter the labour market through training and educational opportunities, employability support, access to childcare, and access to other public services that can assist in that effort.

The second of my priorities is to grow Scotland's economy. From tourism to finance and technology to food and drink exports, we will work to create growth and jobs and to maximise the huge economic opportunities that lie ahead.

Scotland's creative industries are another vital contributor to the economic growth of the country. That is why we are growing investment in culture and screen by £100 million over the coming years. That will ensure that there are more opportunities not only to participate in the arts but for Scotland to reap the economic rewards of the creativity of our nation.

We will work with partners to remove obstacles to the delivery of economic opportunities in Scotland, and we will go all out to encourage investment in Scotland and in the huge potential that we have here—including in renewable energy, on which we can lead the world.

We will strengthen the support for innovation that has been anchored by the investment in the Techscaler programme and in the package of entrepreneurship measures that were set out by the Deputy First Minister on Monday.

Partnership working will be key to helping our businesses boost profitability and create jobs, which will, in turn, help our people to live happier and healthier lives, with higher living standards. The Government will also encourage close alignment between the work of our universities and business to maximise the economic possibilities from the outstanding research base in Scotland.

In modern Scotland, it should not be a struggle to find fair work or to raise a family. For me and for my Government, eradicating child poverty and boosting economic growth go hand in hand. I am therefore pleased to announce the next steps that

we are taking in our drive to eradicate child poverty.

Over the next two years, we will invest £16 million to tackle poverty and help families by expanding access to childcare services within six early adopter community projects. That investment will support low-income families to enter and sustain employment, with funding targeted at those who are most at risk of living in poverty. The investment will enable us to work with local authorities and communities to better understand what it takes to design and deliver local childcare systems that support families with children, from nine months to the end of primary school.

We are already delivering innovative school-age childcare services through our early adopter projects in Glasgow, Inverclyde, Clackmannanshire and Dundee, and families are already seeing the benefits of those services. Today, I am announcing that that new funding will be available to expand that work and to learn more about what childcare should look like for younger children, including in new early adopter communities in Fife and Shetland. That will ensure that children, parents and providers play an important role in designing childcare services that work for them. It will contribute to the eradication of child poverty, and it will support economic growth by helping parents and carers to move into or stay in work through access to affordable childcare.

Growing the economy will also be achieved through the third of my key priorities: tackling the climate emergency by investing in green energy and infrastructure. The threat posed by the climate emergency—and the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss—is real and present, but so is the opportunity to successfully reach net zero and beyond.

The recent significant investments made by Sumitomo and Haventus are illustrations of the type of investments that the Government is determined to attract to Scotland. We will align the capacity generated by our vibrant entrepreneurial nation with our world-leading academic and research institutions, our valuable natural resources and our businesses and communities in a shared agenda to deliver net zero.

According to Office for National Statistics estimates, in 2022, Scotland's renewable energy sector generated £13 billion in turnover and supported more than 25,000 full-time equivalent jobs across Scotland. Analysis shows that, with the right support, the number of low-carbon energy production jobs is estimated to rise to 77,000 by 2050, and supply chain development statements forecast that £25 billion of investment is possible across the supply chain from ScotWind projects alone.

In a modern, prosperous Scotland, we must invest in tackling the climate emergency in a way that creates jobs and brings local businesses and communities with us on that journey.

Eradicating child poverty, growing the economy and tackling the climate emergency all link together to support my fourth key priority: to improve Scotland's public services—not as a cost, but as a vital investment in our future health, equality and prosperity.

The Government will focus on supporting the national health service to recover from the significant disruption due to Covid. We will work with our local authority partners through the Verity house agreement across a range of policy areas, including to continue to improve educational performance and to deliver sustainable social care by reducing delayed discharge.

We will work with partners to improve the efficiency of the criminal justice system to deliver better for victims, and we will engage constructively to expand housing supply to meet the needs of the population and tackle homelessness.

I will set out how my Government and my Cabinet will take practical steps to deliver in those four priority areas when I present my programme for government before the summer recess. Cross-Government work on my four priorities has been under way since I took office, and the actions that my Cabinet will take to deliver on those priorities will be submitted to Parliament for debate before the summer recess.

The programme for government will be central to a wider range of decision making that will happen before the summer on key issues relating to energy, oil and gas, reform of the health service and taxation. Action will be set out on each, to tackle the challenges facing Scotland today.

As set out to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, in June, we will also publish the medium-term financial strategy—alongside a revised tax strategy and infrastructure investment plan pipeline, setting out the position on the public finances—which will contain critical information on the challenges that we face in public finances and the actions that the Government is taking to address them.

That timing ensures that our programme for government and our fiscal strategy are developed in lockstep, with strategies and approaches aligned. It also ensures that we respect and give time to the vital role of the Scottish Fiscal Commission in developing its fiscal forecasts. Quite simply, that is good governance.

There are many strengths in our country today. We have a talented population, abundant natural

resources and dedicated public servants working hard to support our communities. However, we are also operating in a very challenging financial and economic context. It is in that reality that my Government will offer leadership to the country and a willingness to work collaboratively in Parliament to chart a way forward.

My Government does not command a majority in the Parliament. We will be able to tackle the challenges that we face only if we can win the support of others. On this first occasion when I am setting out the priorities of my Government, I set out my willingness to co-operate beyond the Government with other parties to deliver for our people.

I want my country to do well. I know that others in the chamber across all parties want Scotland to do well, too. I offer to bring Parliament together on a shared agenda to make our country better. I invite Parliament to work with me on that journey.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak button now.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): John Swinney's statement today on the approach that his Government will take confirms that he is the ultimate continuity candidate. Looking at his back benchers, I have to say that they seem bored listening to more of the same. I have never seen such little—*[Interruption.]* Well, they are interested in my speech. I bet that the First Minister wishes that they were interested in his.

Instead of accepting the issues that Scots are facing after 17 years of the SNP being in Government, John Swinney is defending the records of Salmond, Sturgeon and Yousaf. Let us hear the truth about the SNP's record. We have the highest taxes in the UK and an economy that is lagging behind the rest of the country. One in seven Scots are on an NHS waiting list. Accident and emergency performance is at record lows. We have a housing emergency. We have the highest number of drug deaths in Europe. Climate targets have been abandoned. Schools are performing at record lows in international comparisons. Violent crime is at its highest level in a decade. That is the truth of the SNP's time in Government.

The only person who seems to think that the SNP has done a good job is John Swinney, the man who has been at the heart of the SNP's time in Government for a decade and a half. This is not a fresh start; it is more of the same promises, which the SNP will break again.

The First Minister has spoken about working across the chamber. In that spirit, I want to work with him, if we can. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Do continue, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I will. I really hope that some of the members will stop laughing when I speak about the bill—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, please continue.

Douglas Ross: I know that the First Minister has spoken about that, but, if he wants to work with other parties, that reaction from the SNP does not help. The First Minister said,

“A good idea is a good idea”,

and I knew that it was a good idea when front-line experts and people with lived experience of addiction came to me with the idea for a bill to enshrine in law the right to recovery. It has been published for more than a week and it is just six pages long. Will John Swinney tell us today whether he will personally get behind that bill?

Although it is commendable to set a goal of eradicating child poverty, that comes from the man who, as the education secretary, was tasked with closing the attainment gap and failed completely.

We have also seen, yet again, that independence is a top priority for the First Minister. His words were that he will put independence “at the heart of” his Government. The public’s priorities are ignored again in favour of the SNP’s obsession with separating Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. When Scotland desperately needs a new approach to fix our public services and create more jobs, John Swinney is offering more of the same.

Finally, just a few days ago, John Swinney said:

“I will demand from my government more concrete actions and fewer strategy documents.”

What a damning indictment of the SNP Government that is from the man who was at the very heart of it for so long. Given that John Swinney held senior positions in successive SNP Governments, can John Swinney tell us what he thinks John Swinney got so badly wrong?

The First Minister: Despite the determined efforts by Douglas Ross to get me off the agenda that I want to pursue, which is about building alignment and building co-operation in Parliament, I will resist the temptation to go on to the ground that he wants me to go on.

Douglas Ross: It is your record. It is your record!

The Presiding Officer: We will hear from the First Minister without interruption.

The First Minister: I am very happy to defend the record of the SNP Government. I set out—*[Interruption.]*—in formidable detail—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, just a moment.

We have a great many members who would really appreciate an opportunity to put a question to the First Minister from across the chamber. I would like us to be able to hear from as many members as possible. In order that we can do so, I would be grateful if members could resist any temptation to intervene when they have not been called to speak.

The First Minister: I set out in formidable detail the record of the Government, and Mr Ross—*[Interruption.]*—posed a question to me. He suggested that I was the only person who thought that the SNP Government had done a good job. I am afraid that Mr Ross is wrong on that, because in 2011, the people of Scotland thought that this Government had done a good job. They thought it again in 2016. In 2021—*[Interruption.]*—the people of Scotland—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister—I am sorry. I am going to insist that members resist any temptation to contribute from our seats.

The First Minister: In 2021, the Scottish National Party achieved the highest number of constituency votes ever recorded for any party in the history of devolution. The people like the SNP Government.

I accept that my party has faced a tough time; I could not have been more open about that. However, I am going to use the next two years to make sure that we are fit and well to win the 2026 election for the people of Scotland and return this Government.

Douglas Ross asked me about the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill. I have looked at Mr Ross’s bill and I am in the process of taking advice about it. I am taking it deadly seriously. Along with the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, Christina McKelvie, I will look at the content of the bill to ensure that we consider all the issues that it raises.

I have to be open with Parliament that there are mixed opinions about Mr Ross’s bill. It does not command universal support within the community of stakeholders who are interested in what I know that Mr Ross is interested in, which is tackling the issue of drugs deaths. If we are prepared to have an open discussion among stakeholders, I am all for that discussion. I will meet Mr Ross to do exactly that—to explore the issues.

On the attainment gap, in primary schools it is at its lowest level on record. The work that we have

done and the investment that we have made in closing the attainment gap are having an effect.

I am determined to ensure that the Government delivers on the commitments that it has made to the people of Scotland. That is what I am in office to do, and that is exactly what I am going to turn my mind to.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Three years into this parliamentary session, we are on to our third First Minister and our third statement of priorities. After 17 years, John Swinney should not pretend that this is day 1 of a new SNP Government. He says that we should acknowledge where progress has been made, but there is no acknowledgement of the mistakes that have been made or the failures that have got us to this point.

The single biggest crisis that this Government faces is in our NHS, with more than 820,000 of our fellow Scots on an NHS waiting list. However, all that we got today was a passing reference to the need for a recovery. When will we get the actual detail? We need a Government that is serious about renewing and reforming our NHS. That is, of course, about money, but it is also about structure, workforce planning and innovation, on which there is no vision and no plan from this Government.

John Swinney expects us to think that believing in economic growth is somehow a revelation. That used to be the basics of politics in Scotland and the UK, but we have had three years in which a hostile environment has been created for business in Scotland, and we have had ministers in Government who did not even believe in economic growth. Therefore, we need more than just words, because a failure to grow Scotland's economy has meant that income tax has been used as a substitute for economic growth, meaning that people pay more and get less as a result.

Of course, we share the First Minister's objective to end child poverty. Ending poverty is in Labour's DNA, but the Government needs to look at the decisions that it is making to challenge poverty on education, housing, skills and employability. Let us not forget that it was John Swinney who downgraded the results of working-class kids in the pandemic and whose decisions have led to cuts to teacher numbers and resources in their very classrooms. Where is the change of direction?

I accept that there are challenges in the public finances. That makes ending incompetence, waste and financial mismanagement even more important, and that must mean that we make sure that we get value for money for every £1 of taxpayers' money that is spent. Does the First Minister accept that that requires him to change the approach that he has taken in the past 17

years, which has left every Scottish institution weaker than he found it?

Finally, will the new approach also mean the end to Government by gimmick and press release? This is a Government that declared a drug deaths emergency, and drug deaths have gone up. This is a Government that declared a climate emergency and that now wants to scrap the climate change targets. This is a Government that declared, rightly, a housing emergency but also cut the affordable housing budget. More of the same ain't going to cut it. People can see through 17 years of SNP failure, and they want change. Is the First Minister up to delivering it?

The First Minister: I can see that I am going to have to work quite hard to cheer up Mr Sarwar in this Parliament, but I am going to—

Anas Sarwar: It is your back benchers that you need to cheer up.

The First Minister: My back benchers are really quite happy with where we are nowadays, believe you me. I am very clear that my back benchers are happy about where we are these days.

Mr Sarwar raises the issues in the national health service of money, structure and workforce planning, so let us take each of those. On money, as I rehearsed with Mr Sarwar last week, the Government has allocated to the NHS the strongest settlement of any aspect of our public services, to such an extent that the NHS now occupies a greater proportion of the Scottish budget than when the Government came to office. Those are undeniable statistics.

We can allocate only the money that is at our disposal. We would have less money to allocate if we now followed the attitude of Mr Sarwar, who has changed his mind on tax. *[Interruption.]* I think that Mr Sarwar is saying to me that that is not true. I am sorry, but I have been listening carefully to Mr Sarwar and Mr Marra, and both of them have changed their stance on tax. They voted for the measures that the Government put in place in the first place to ask higher earners to pay slightly more in taxation than they would if they lived in the rest of the United Kingdom, but they have now reversed their position on that. That means that they cannot ask me for more money for the health service, because they would cut public expenditure and make less money available for the NHS.

On the question of the challenges in the public finances, I thought that Mr Sarwar would come here with a different script, because I thought that he would have listened carefully to what Wes Streeting said on the television on Sunday. Mr Streeting told it the way it is. He said:

“All roads do lead to Westminster because, even though this is devolved, decisions taken in Westminster have an effect on the NHS across the whole country.”

He was talking about Wales, and the same issues apply in Scotland—it is Westminster that is the problem in all of this.

Mr Sarwar said that every Scottish institution is weaker than it was when we came to office. I ask him to take a look at Scotland today—look at the strength in our universities and the strength in the public institutions of Scotland that are serving our country well. What he has said is insulting to public services in Scotland, and I will not entertain it.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The First Minister is right that addressing the climate emergency can be good for the economy. If we get it right, it will protect people from high energy bills, too. However, he knows that the members of his party who have spent years lobbying against climate action and for the oil and gas industry are still doing so, and, after the events of recent weeks, they are emboldened. Does he have the courage that has been so clearly lacking in the past to face them down, refuse their demands and commit to the radical acceleration of climate action that is so clearly needed, such as action to cut road traffic, action to decarbonise heat and other actions that are necessary if Scotland is to make up for so much lost ground over so many years?

The First Minister: I hope that I have made it clear to the Parliament that climate action represents one of the four key priorities that will drive this Government. I want to ensure that we take steps that will take people and businesses with us on that journey, because we must do that with people—we have to take people with us.

Before I came to the Parliament this afternoon, I met the First Minister’s environmental council—a group of experts who are providing advice and inputting into the Government’s thinking on net zero—and we discussed the very issues that Mr Harvie raised with me, such as the importance of effective and urgent action to tackle the climate crisis. Those discussions will be reflected in the plans that the Government will bring to the Parliament in due course, which will be in accordance with our targets and aspirations to achieve net zero in the timescale that we have set out.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am in politics to get things done, to do right by my constituents and to try to change our country for the better. That is why I want the First Minister to tackle the issues that matter to the people who sent us here. Does he recognise that those people want change and need a Government that will get the basics right on education standards and tackling violence in our

classrooms; on getting access to a general practitioner at the first time of asking and having a dental practice nearby that still offers NHS care; on missed climate targets; on sewage dumping in our rivers; on the ferries fiasco; and on the 175,000 Scots suffering from long Covid, whom the Government seems to have forgotten all about? Does he recognise that Scotland has had enough of the worn-out divisions of the past?

The First Minister: I have made it clear to the Parliament, in all that I have done over the past few weeks, that collaboration across the parliamentary chamber is essential for what lies ahead. In fact, it is not only essential but a necessity for a Government that does not have a majority. Let us be crystal clear: the Government has to change the way in which it interacts with the Parliament. That is a fact of life now.

As I have made clear, I will be very happy to engage with all parties to address the issues that our country faces. I am in politics to get things done. I want to ensure that Scotland is a better country as a consequence of the activities of the Government, and I am sure that Mr Cole-Hamilton shares that aspiration.

There are answers that I could give to the points that Mr Cole-Hamilton raised. On education standards, as I have said, the attainment gap is at its lowest level for primary school pupils, and attainment at primary level is higher than it has ever been. Progress is being made; we can all acknowledge that. However, I am certain that the Parliament will have more of an effect on the public if we are able to work together in common cause, and I commit to doing that.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Many members wish to put a question to the First Minister, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister’s commitment to the eradication of child poverty, a task that has been made difficult by the 15 years of austerity that began under the last UK Labour Government, which imposed cuts that were deeper and tougher than those made by Margaret Thatcher. Does he agree that the best way to reduce child poverty is for parents to be in well-paid employment? As growing the economy to provide high-quality employment amidst Brexit, UK economic incompetence and Scotland’s budget being repeatedly cut will not be easy, can the First Minister remind the chamber what additional measures the Government will introduce to promote new start-ups, innovation and growth?

The First Minister: The economic context that Mr Gibson sets out is part of the reality that we must face up to. Austerity is undermining the

resources that are available to us, including those for public services—hence the importance that I attach to growing the economy to improve and expand the tax base. Therefore, the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee makes substantial points in that respect.

On Monday, the Deputy First Minister announced a £5 million package of support for start-up companies. That takes forward the recommendations that were made by Mark Logan and Ana Stewart and builds on the investments that have been made in the Techscaler programme, which the Deputy First Minister and I saw in Barclays in Glasgow last Friday. Therefore, the support to ensure that we have a strong ecosystem that supports innovation is essential to encourage economic growth in our country.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The legacy of the time when education was this Government's priority and the now First Minister was education secretary is one of plummeting programme for international student assessment scores, an attainment gap that remains stubbornly high, violence in schools, falling teacher numbers and promise after promise on laptops, school meals, contact time and recruitment broken and sometimes even abandoned. How can the people of Scotland have any faith in this First Minister delivering the priorities that he has set out today, given that his delivery while he was education secretary was such an abject failure?

The First Minister: If we look at the performance of Scottish education today, we will see record levels of literacy and numeracy attainment at primary school level and improvements at secondary school level. There is a record-low attainment gap in literacy between the proportion of primary school pupils from the most and the least deprived areas who are achieving curriculum for excellence levels, and there are reductions in that gap at secondary level.

Last summer, we had the highest ever number of passes at national 5 and a record number of vocational and technical qualifications were achieved. In 2022-23, 95.9 per cent of school leavers were in a positive destination three months after the end of the school year—the highest level on record. If that is the consequence of my stewardship of education, I am pleased that we are making the progress that we are making.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's offer to work cross-party, and I hope that he will be able to update the chamber on the costed proposals that the other parties bring forward.

The First Minister has clearly set out the challenging financial climate and the fact that all roads lead to Westminster, but will he agree to

look again at using all the ScotWind moneys for day-to-day revenue, as I think that he understands and appreciates the critical need for financial resilience and financial sustainability—something that seems to have been completely forgotten by Westminster?

The First Minister: I understand exactly the point that Michelle Thomson puts to me. The Government has got to make a careful set of decisions about the use of the resources that we have available to us. We have earmarked the ScotWind resources for long-term investment in the economy, although, given the pressure on the public finances—I have been absolutely candid with Parliament today about the intensity of those pressures—we face difficult choices in ensuring that we can deliver the services and the policies that we wish to deliver within the financial resources that we have available to us, because of the persistence of austerity.

Some of that could change if there was a change of UK Government. Later today, a general election might be announced—who knows what on earth is coming?—and some degree of change might come about in that respect. Who knows? However, what I can say to Michelle Thomson is that the Government will give consideration to all those issues as we take forward the development of the medium-term fiscal strategy and then the annual budget, which will be presented to Parliament later this year.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have one thing to say to the First Minister: bring it on.

I am disappointed that there was nothing specific to rescue the NHS from crisis. Health is devolved and, although I know that it is not just about the money—it is about what we do with it—I will give the First Minister some undeniable statistics. Until the SNP came to power, Scotland spent 22 per cent more on health per head than was spent in England. Today, that gap is only 3 per cent, as a result of decisions taken on the SNP's watch.

Of course, this is not year zero. John Swinney was the finance minister who failed to pass on money from the UK Labour Government that would have seen the NHS £1 billion a year better off today. Does the First Minister believe that he should apologise to NHS staff and patients for the past 17 years of this SNP Government, which has left the NHS weaker, not stronger?

The First Minister: I really do not know what Jackie Baillie is talking about in relation to the issue with the UK Labour Government. It is so long ago that I might have become forgetful, but I gave a commitment—

Jackie Baillie: I have a very good memory, as does the First Minister.

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie can write to me about it if she wishes, and I will consider it.

Jackie Baillie: I do not wish to.

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie tells me that she does not wish to. That is possibly because—

Jackie Baillie: I have just told you.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Perhaps the accusation does not have substance to it, and it might not make it into a letter in black and white.

We have passed on the consequential that have been available from UK Governments to the health service in Scotland. If there is any apologising to be done, I think that Jackie Baillie should apologise for two things. First, when the Labour Executive was in power in this Parliament, it failed to spend £1.6 billion of public money. It left it in the Treasury and it incurred massive private finance initiative costs, which we are still having to pay in Scotland today.

Secondly, Jackie Baillie should apologise for the crippling burden that that PFI legacy is posing to the Scottish Government and to local authorities the length and breadth of our country.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): As the First Minister said in his statement, Scotland's finances are still very dependent on Westminster; I think that Labour agrees with that as well. He mentioned supporting the NHS and expanding the housing supply, but will he explain how we can make progress on those matters if Westminster keeps squeezing our budgets—particularly our capital budgets?

The First Minister: The capital budget is a particular challenge because of the degree of erosion of it by two factors. The first is the direct cuts that have been made by the UK Government, which are of the order of 10 per cent over anticipated years. The second factor is the corrosive effect of inflation, which is even worse in capital projects, because construction inflation is invariably significantly higher than routine inflation in the economy. As I have rehearsed with Mr Mason before, some capital project costs in the private sector are now coming in inflated by perhaps 30 to 50 per cent on the original expected costs.

There is a challenge there, which is why we are having to wrestle with the contents of the infrastructure investment plan to ensure that we have a sustainable programme that will meet the expectations of the public in Scotland. We have to try to activate additional sources of finance. The Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan, is trying to identify and work with a range of interested parties

to expand the resources that are available specifically for investment in housing.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In the past week, Unite the union and Offshore Energies UK have warned that the Scottish Government's presumption against oil and gas development is threatening thousands of jobs, which will have a severe impact on our economy and block the economic growth that most people agree we need. The First Minister's two predecessors refused to remove the presumption against new oil and gas. Will the First Minister take the opportunity to remove that presumption against oil and gas, or will it be more of the same?

The First Minister: As I said in my statement, the Government will set out its proposals, including the issues that Mr Lumsden raises with me, in the finalised energy strategy, which will be shared with Parliament in due course.

I want to engage constructively with the oil and gas sector. I was in Aberdeen on Friday and had healthy and constructive discussions with a range of stakeholders, many of whom are involved in oil and gas, and I welcome the contributions that were made. I will be discussing those issues in due course with Unite the union. I am keen to have that conversation and will do so at the earliest opportunity.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is important that our rural and island communities can see that this SNP Government is the Government that will work for them. Projects such as the new Stornoway deepwater terminal, backed by £33.7 million in Scottish Government funding, represent the latest chapter of the SNP Government's commitment to the prosperity of rural Scotland. Will the First Minister set out how the Highlands and Islands feature in his priorities for his Government?

The First Minister: I am glad that Emma Roddick referred to the development of the deepwater terminal in Stornoway. It is already fulfilling its original purpose of providing a safe berth for cruise vessels, which are bringing thousands of visitors into the Western Isles who would not previously have been able to access the area.

The terminal provides a welcome economic boost. I was discussing the project with Stornoway Port Authority on Friday when I was speaking about the economy. I was pleased to hear about the progress that is being made and to hear that the investment that was facilitated by the Scottish Government, and which the Scottish Government has made, is having such a strong and positive effect.

In addition, the Government has commitments to the regional growth deals, many of which affect the Highlands and Islands. We will take forward the islands programme, which has already distributed resources to a range of island communities. I hope that I will soon have the opportunity to travel to Scotland's islands in order to make clear the importance that I attach to addressing the needs of every part of our country. I will do that as soon as the opportunity arises.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister cannot tackle child poverty if education is not made a priority. I am disappointed that education does not appear in the First Minister's list of priorities because, right now in Scotland, education is in a perilous state. Despite the statistics that the First Minister chooses to quote, performance in PISA scores has dropped, teaching is a precarious career, more pupils are absent from school and the situation that faces pupils with additional support needs has been described as intolerable. Pupils, teachers, schools, staff and parents have been let down.

When the First Minister was education secretary, he said that closing the attainment gap was his priority, but the gap in secondary school is no better now than it was in 2016. He said that fairness in assessment during the Covid pandemic was a priority, but the exams fiasco downgraded the poorest pupils. He once said that maintaining teacher numbers would be a priority, but 450 teachers are to be cut in Glasgow alone. Should we be worried about the priorities that the First Minister set out today?

The First Minister: I am not sure whether Pam Duncan-Glancy picked up all that I said in my statement, but I made clear the importance that the Government attaches to education as part of my priority on public services. I spent five years as education secretary, when I was immersed in discussions with educationists the length and breadth of the country. One of the points that were strongly made to me was that the corrosive nature of poverty among children was the most significant factor that eroded educational performance and engagement.

I am not quite sure how Pam Duncan-Glancy does not accept that the steps that the Government is taking through, for example, the Scottish child payment—one of the factors that are contributing to keeping 100,000 children in Scotland out of poverty—are not beneficial to our education system. That is an essential investment that the Government is making. It does not happen in any other part of the United Kingdom, and it is a measure that has been described as one that has had the biggest impact on reducing child poverty in Europe in 40 years. Why can we not accept that

we are on the right course to tackle child poverty and improve educational attainment?

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's commitment to tackling child poverty. Last week, the renowned right-wing Conservative, Suella Braverman, called for an end to the cruel two-child benefit cap, which Keir Starmer has ruled out. Can the First Minister advise what difference could be made to child poverty levels in Scotland if the cap were removed? Can he confirm that it will be a priority of the Scottish Government to press the UK Government to take action in that regard?

The First Minister: The issue that Rona Mackay raises is very important, because it affects the amount of money that is going into low-income households that are living in poverty. It is a deadly serious issue with significant human consequences. The child payment is so effective because it puts money directly into the hands of families who are struggling.

The analysis that has been undertaken suggests that, should the two-child limit be lifted, around 10,000 children would be lifted out of poverty overnight—10,000 children. The two-child limit was a deliberate policy decision of the United Kingdom Government, and maintaining it appears to be a deliberate policy decision of the aspiring Labour Government. It is absolutely indefensible, because it is subjecting children in our country to poverty and it should be removed right away.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): John Swinney was finance secretary and sat at the Cabinet table when the SNP wasted hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money during the common agricultural policy farm payment scandal. He was the Deputy First Minister who negotiated the green deal, which was a disaster for rural Scotland on so many fronts. Today, as First Minister, he talks about growing Scotland's economy, but he has failed to acknowledge the vital role of farmers and producers in his statement. When will he recognise the importance of farmers, crofters and land managers? Will he commit to publishing a draft rural support plan before stage 3 of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill?

The First Minister: I represent a diverse parliamentary constituency, which includes part of the great city of Perth, but the overwhelming majority of it is country area in rural Perthshire. I understand and am closely connected with the farming community that I have represented for more than a quarter of a century. What that community says to me is that it has been hung out to dry by the Tories over Brexit, and I will never let them forget that.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Although Scotland leads the UK in affordable and social housing provision, support for housing costs and grant funding for home efficiency improvements, there are challenges to overcome. Indeed, our Parliament has declared a housing emergency. Can the First Minister outline how his Government's approach to housing policy will help to achieve the mission of eradicating child poverty?

The First Minister: The points that Ruth Maguire raises are very important. We have to ensure that we have a sustainable investment programme for affordable housing. I set out in my statement the progress that we have made; what we have delivered means that we are in a stronger position than any other part of the United Kingdom. However, we face acute challenges in the housing budget because of the reduction in the capital budget and the significant erosion of the financial transactions resources that would habitually have been used to fund housing expenditure. That is why the Minister for Housing and the housing investment task force are exploring expanding the sources of capital that are available to support our affordable housing programme. The progress on that will be reported to Parliament as the minister holds those discussions.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I note that the First Minister has stated that his number 1 priority is eradicating child poverty. I welcomed the announcement that the Government made in February on school meal debt, which the First Minister spoke about again today, but it is just a temporary reprieve. We know that the attainment, behaviour and attention of children in schools is much improved when they are not going hungry. When will the Government fulfil its promise on free school meals?

The First Minister: Ash Regan makes an important point, and I recognise the significance of free school meals. We have an extensive amount of free school meal provision in the education system and the Government is looking at the resources that are available to us to determine at what stage we will be able to pursue any expansion of that programme.

However, I have to say to Parliament—and I have been completely open about this point—that we face significant financial challenges because of the combination of austerity, Brexit and the effect of inflation on the financial resources that are available to us. We will consider all those issues as we formulate our budget proposals this year.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I was very moved to hear the First Minister speak of his wife's tirelessness in trying to make sure that multiple sclerosis does not get in the way

of her living her life to the full. As someone who grew up as a child of a deaf father, I was well aware of the struggles that come with living with additional support needs. With that in mind, how will the Scottish Government ensure that people in Scotland who are living with additional support needs are supported in living their lives to the full?

The First Minister: I am very grateful to my colleague Karen Adam for her kind remarks. In her comments, she referred to her support for her father. I cannot miss the opportunity to commend the support that my wonderful son gives to his mother when his father is not on the scene, and even when his father is on the scene. Let me put that on the record today.

The Government has a number of commitments to strengthen the support that is available to individuals with additional support needs. Those commitments are delivered at an individual level. We are mindful of the report that the Education, Children and Young People Committee has recently published on additional support needs. We will be considering the contents of the committee's report, because I recognise that the evidence base that has been supplied is of significance. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will have more to say to Parliament about that in due course.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister's statement.

Adult Mental Health

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-13291, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on adult mental health. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call on Richard Leonard to open the debate on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

15:47

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I am very pleased to be opening this afternoon's debate on the Public Audit Committee's inquiry into adult mental health. I thank the clerks and other staff for their immense effort on the production of the report.

As we tackle stigma and discrimination, more people now feel able to talk about, and to seek help for, their mental health. That is to be welcomed, but the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have piled even more pressure on already strained services, not least because both have hit people with already existing mental health conditions the hardest. Combined, those are increasing not a demand but, as one witness told us, a need—a social need—which the Government has a duty to meet.

Let me thank the minister at the outset for her considered and comprehensive response to the committee's report. Let me also congratulate her on introducing something new to the lexicon of ministerial responses to committee reports of this Parliament, because, on a number of our conclusions, she informs us that she is "sympathetic" and, on yet others, that she accepts "the premise" of our recommendation. That sent me scurrying off to my dictionary to look up the definition of a "premise". There it was, in between "premiere" and "premium",

"a proposition supporting a conclusion",

along with the illustrative sentence,

"If the premise is true, then the conclusion must be true."

So, I hope that the minister and her officials are using the same dictionary as me.

The committee is grateful to the wide range of witnesses who gave very powerful evidence to inform our report findings. They included mental health organisations and charities representing people experiencing, or at risk of, poor mental health; professions and organisations directly responsible for supporting people with their mental health; and representatives of Government and governing bodies that are directly accountable to

the Parliament. Each of those voices was invaluable in informing our report conclusions and recommendations.

We are the Public Audit Committee, and our starting point is funding. There have been two significant in-year and emergency budget cuts to mental health spending in each of the past two financial years—fact. Overall, since 2017, there has been a real-terms increase in funding for adult mental health services and a 16 per cent rise in national health service board spending—fact. There has also been a 14 per cent real-terms increase in local authority spending on adult mental health—fact.

However, it is also a fact that we do not know what the impact of those spending decisions has been—including, critically, whether people's mental health has improved—because we have no data on outcomes. There are also data gaps, which mean that we do not know what the true demand—the true need—for mental health care in Scotland is. We do not know the number of people with a severe and enduring mental health condition, so we cannot accurately assess demand for mental health support in primary care. We have no data on referrals or case loads for community mental health teams. There is also a gap in data on psychiatric services, including on the number of referrals, the number of people on waiting lists, how long people are waiting for treatment and the length of treatment. We do not know.

We welcome the Scottish Government's response, which recognises those data gaps and alerts us to work that is under way

"to improve the collection of data on mental health in primary care".

Let me say gently to the minister, however, that not all the data gaps that we highlight are in the realm of primary care, which leaves the committee questioning the extent to which the broader, systematic data gaps will be addressed. That is essential, but it is also desperately urgent, precisely because the Government is committed to spending

"10% of the front-line NHS budget ... on mental health"

by the end of this parliamentary session.

In their report, the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission described accessing mental health support as "slow and complicated", which is a view that witnesses whom we heard from reinforced.

Our report welcomes

"the Scottish Government's ambition to achieve a more preventative primary care-based adult mental health service",

and we welcome

“its commitment to ensure that every GP practice has access to a mental health and wellbeing service by 2026.”

However, we also seek assurances that sufficient funding will be put in place to realise those ambitions.

To be blunt, the Scottish Government's response to date falls short of providing such assurances. Instead, there is a commitment, in its written response, to

“promoting and adopting this model where possible.”

I ask the cabinet secretary and the minister whether the Scottish Government remains committed to its 2026 target for general practitioner services.

The committee's report also welcomes the Scottish Government's promise to ensure that people have a choice in how they access services, including psychological therapy appointments—a choice in whether they are digital or face to face. However, the evidence that we heard suggests that not everyone who wants a face-to-face appointment is getting one. Striking as well is the evidence of marked variations between health boards, which the Government needs to get to the bottom of and report back to Parliament on.

I turn to mental health inequalities. Of course, no one is immune from poor mental health, but the Mental Health Foundation reminded us that poverty, homelessness, living in poor-quality housing and having limited access to green space all increase the chances of having a mental health problem. During its evidence, it stated:

“One of the best ways of reducing mental health inequalities would be to require every Government decision to be assessed on its impact on mental health.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 9 November 2023; c 23.]

We note that the Government rejects that proposal, pointing instead to the establishment of internal equality champions, even though the Auditor General concluded that the Government has not yet shown that

“mental health inequalities are being considered enough outside of the Mental Health Directorate.”

The committee therefore remains unpersuaded by the Government's response and, in our report, we ask the cabinet secretary and the minister what more can and will be done to advance a “whole-of-Government approach” to tackling mental health inequalities.

Finally, our report highlights staff recruitment difficulties and high vacancy and turnover rates right across the mental health workforce. Indeed, vacancy rates for mental health officers and mental health nurses have doubled, while there is a chronic national shortage of psychologists.

During evidence, we explored with the Royal College of Psychiatrists the extreme pressure that its members are under. We heard its compelling evidence of “a workforce crisis” and an over-reliance on locum psychiatrists, which neither represents value for money nor provides a guarantee of service quality. Therefore, we call on the minister to publish regular statistical bulletins on the state of the mental health workforce and to give much higher priority to workforce planning in adult mental health.

This is a serious and detailed report by a cross-party committee of this Parliament. Its findings are unanimous. Its conclusions and recommendations are direct. It must be a call to action to this Government and to this Parliament. In plain terms, there is no alternative, because the people who we are sent here to represent simply cannot wait.

On behalf of the Public Audit Committee, I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee's 1st Report, 2024 (Session 6), Adult mental health (SP Paper 532).

15:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I begin by acknowledging the work by the Public Audit Committee, led by Richard Leonard, its members and clerks, in preparing a comprehensive and balanced report on adult mental health. The report is “serious and detailed”, as Richard Leonard described it. It describes some of the systemic issues that we know exist and it builds on the Audit Scotland report on the same topic that was published in September.

I believe that our mental health and wellbeing strategy, our delivery plan and our workforce action plan give a clear idea of our policy direction. The strategy vision is of a Scotland that is free from stigma and inequality, where everyone fulfils their right to achieve the best mental health and wellbeing possible. It contains our blueprint for a high-functioning mental health system and a set of outcomes that will enable us to measure our progress. It describes the help and support that anyone should be entitled to expect when they ask for it.

The delivery plan and the workforce action plan set out the first set of actions that we are taking to move us closer to our vision, covering an initial period of 18 months. We do not yet have a whole mental health system that is fully reflective of our vision. Although we have made progress in recent years, it is important that we are open and not defensive about the issues that we know still exist. We recognise that our mental health system

continues to face increasing demand and financial pressures. As Richard Leonard said, those needs are linked to Covid, Brexit and, of course, the United Kingdom cost of living crisis. We know from listening to our incredible workforce that they encounter a myriad of challenges every day. We also recognise that there has not been parity of esteem between physical and mental health.

Next week, I will come to Parliament to outline our initial thinking on the future of health and social care services. We know that we need to think differently. I want to have a collaborative discussion about our options, putting party politics to one side.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Can I tempt the cabinet secretary to outline now what tangible difference will be made to mental health services?

Neil Gray: I said to Ms Baillie in our earlier conversation that I am open to suggestion. I will come forward, as the minister will in concluding, with some of the work that we are already doing and the steps that we need to take to make further improvements. I pledge to engage with Opposition members on how we continue to evolve our mental health and wellbeing policy in the same spirit.

I was pleased to see so much support and involvement from members across the chamber and in Government for last week's mental health awareness week. Visiting community organisations that support mental health across the country demonstrated that mental health is a cross-Government and cross-party priority.

The Public Audit Committee's report encapsulates and reflects the context that I have described. I agree with much of it, and I will describe some of the on-going work to address the issues that have been raised. I, too, thank the many organisations and individuals that Richard Leonard thanked for taking the time to give evidence and contribute to the committee's inquiry. It is unsurprising that the valuable input from so many people led the committee to some of the same conclusions that the Government arrived at following our extensive engagement when we developed our strategy, which included a full public consultation. The themes are clear: the need for prevention and early intervention approaches, the importance of peer support, tackling the workforce challenge, and the need to improve the data and evidence that are available to us.

Underpinning all our work is the budgetary situation. We face the most challenging public finances since devolution, as the First Minister has set out, and Wes Streeting has explained the impact across all of the UK. However, even in that context, we have seen historic increases in mental

health spending, which reflects how much of a priority it is for the Government. The core mental health budget has more than doubled since 2020-21. Under the Scottish National Party, mental health spending by NHS Scotland has doubled in cash terms to £1.3 billion in 2022-23, compared with £651 million in 2006-07. The Government and Parliament have worked hard to raise the profile of mental health and wellbeing and ensure that our increased funding is focused on improving outcomes. As Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I commit to maintaining that level of focus and prioritisation. There is no health without mental health.

I will give two examples of our work to address specific issues that are raised in the committee's report. The contribution and sustainability of our incredible third sector is a fundamental part of our vision for a high-functioning mental health system that ensures a good balance between specialist services and activities that are focused on upstream support and prevention. I witnessed the value of structured peer support and early intervention when I visited the changing room—extra time programme at Pittodrie stadium last week. That is why we have invested a further £15 million for the communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults in 2024-25, which will be distributed to grass-roots projects by the Third Sector Interface Scotland network. The announcement means that we will have made £66 million available through our communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults since 2021. That fund supported an estimated 300,000 people across Scotland in its first year.

However, as the committee recognises, stability of funding is key, and we will continue to explore options regarding multiyear funding whenever possible. To give one example, I note that we announced in March that the next round of the perinatal and infant mental health fund was open for applications through Inspiring Scotland, with funding continuing until the end of March 2026.

As Richard Leonard mentioned, the committee also highlights the importance of data collection and outlines where there are currently gaps. I, too, recognise the need for improvement in data quality. Areas such as primary care and psychiatry referrals are being prioritised, and a range of activity to improve our data is being led by Public Health Scotland. I welcome the committee's endorsement of Public Health Scotland's commitment to publish our mental health quality indicators in a dashboard format, and I confirm that that is scheduled to go live in November. Those are just two areas where work is on-going.

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport wrote to the committee and responded to each of its 29 recommendations in detail, as Mr

Leonard said. None of what I have outlined today is meant to deflect or distract from a full and frank acknowledgement that we still have work to do. That is fully in keeping with our mental health and wellbeing strategy. We have a blueprint for what good looks like, but we are not there yet. The committee's report summarises that context accurately, as did Audit Scotland's report. There are many areas in which we are already working tirelessly to address the conclusions that are reached in the report.

I finish with a sincere offer to colleagues across the chamber. Our delivery plan represents only the first 18 months' worth of commitments. Those actions need to result in measurable progress towards the outcomes that are outlined in our strategy, which will in turn move us closer to achieving our vision. If there are suggestions on where the Government could go further or where there are gaps in our delivery plan, the minister and I will always be willing to engage in constructive discussion about that.

I thank the Public Audit Committee and everyone who contributed to its inquiry on adult mental health for their work. As Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I am determined to face the challenges head on and to see an improving picture.

16:05

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It was a pleasure and, to be honest, a bit of an eye-opener for me to be involved in the inquiry into adult mental health. I, too, thank all the witnesses that the committee heard from, the committee clerks and indeed the minister for her detailed response to our report. Despite reaching new heights of Government gobbledegook, it was a good response. I also thank my fellow committee members.

The words "crisis" and "emergency" are used a lot, but there is a mental health crisis. We heard that repeatedly from various witnesses. I want to focus on three areas today—the police, a round-the-clock model of care, and the experience of people with mental health issues of getting help from their GPs. I will take those in reverse order.

The difficulty of seeing a GP and the barriers that people with a mental health issue face in doing so were a feature of our evidence sessions. I asked several witnesses about that because my view is that the system that is operated by a lot of GPs, whereby people have to explain themselves to a receptionist, may put people off. Jo Anderson of the Scottish Association for Mental Health told us:

"Graham Simpson is absolutely right."

I do not hear that too often, but that is what she said. She continued:

"I mentioned the number of times that people have to describe their situation, and the receptionist is the first place that they have to do so.

People quite often told us ... that it is difficult to even get to sit in front of a GP."—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 9 November 2023; c 5.]

Dr Chris Williams of the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland said:

"it drives frustration and negative experience. At the moment, general practice and our GP workforce face a difficult time."—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 16 November 2023; c 9.]

Of course they do.

We state in our report's conclusions:

"The Committee recognises the key role that GPs play in supporting people with their mental health. We are concerned however that having to first explain their medical symptoms to a receptionist may deter some people from approaching their GP for help. We suggest that the Scottish Government works with NHS Health Boards to develop guidance for GP practices setting out options that can be used to support people wishing to make a GP appointment for their mental health."

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport's response to that was, in my view, disappointing to say the least. She basically disagreed with it. However, we need to make seeing a GP easier and stigma free not just for those with mental health problems, but for everyone. The briefing that RCGP Scotland sent us for today's debate says that there should be a mix of appointment types and booking methods. I urge the Government to look at that, not just for people with mental health problems but for everybody. There is an idea for the cabinet secretary.

The second area that I want to mention is a model of mental health care that is mentioned in the Auditor General's report that exists in Trieste, Italy. Sadly—I do not blame the convener for this—we did not get to see that model at first hand. However, in Trieste, they have set up what is essentially a new way of dealing with mental health. The system operates through a network of mental health centres that operate 24 hours a day. People do not need an appointment—they can just walk in. Not only has it improved the way in which mental health is dealt with in that area, but it is also cheaper than what was there before. However, that is not why they do it—they do it because it is better.

The committee heard mixed views about the merits of the Trieste model, but we invited the Scottish Government to consider further the lessons that can be learned from it. From the minister's response, people would think that we are already following that model, but we are not.

She pointed to the Thrive model in Edinburgh and Hope Point mental health hub in Dundee as

“examples of local developments which have adopted many of the principles of the Trieste approach.”

However, if everything was as rosy as she was trying to make out, we would not have the issues that are connected with the third strand of my argument today, which is about the amount of police officer time that is being taken up in dealing with mental health issues.

It is quite clear to me from speaking to officers in my patch and hearing from our witnesses that our officers are spending far too much time—sometimes, it is the majority of their time—dealing with people with mental health problems. Indeed, Chief Constable Jo Farrell has spoken about that recently. Every year, the police respond to more than 100,000 mental health incidents, only 13 per cent of which involve a crime. On busy days, a call that is related to mental health comes in every two or three minutes.

In England, some forces are adopting a hard line and responding to mental health incidents only when a crime has been committed or where there is an immediate threat to life. Ms Farrell says that she does not want to go that far, but she argues that Police Scotland must no longer be asked to carry out the routine work of other agencies. I agree. She says that she wants her officers to stop carrying out welfare checks on people with mental health problems. My question to Ms Farrell is, if she does not want to follow the English model, exactly what she does want to do, given that her officers are reaching the point of burn-out because of the situation. Incidentally, the minister’s response to the issue was to mention a multi-agency group, whatever that is.

I say to the minister and everyone in the sector that we need action and not talking shops in order to help those who are suffering and those who are tasked with helping them.

16:11

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I put on record my thanks to the members and clerks of the Public Audit Committee for their work on this vital and timely report on adult mental health services. I also commend the many witnesses who gave evidence to the committee on this subject matter and contributed valuable insight on all aspects of the mental health landscape.

The committee’s report, and the Audit Scotland report “Adult mental health” before it, have left no doubt: mental health services are in crisis. A sharp increase in demand for support, in part due to the impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, has added further pressure to an already strained service.

However, worsening mental health in the Scottish population is not the fault of the people and we cannot blame an increase in poor mental health alone for the pressure on services. Individuals often have little control over the circumstances that lead to them requiring support. Indeed, they have no control over national or global events such as recessions or pandemics, and we should welcome the fact that more people feel comfortable enough to speak up and seek help when they need it.

Although we know that demand is rising, concerningly, we know only part of the picture. As the committee report says, we need better-quality data to fully understand the scale of demand. At present, data is published on psychological therapies waiting times, but that is largely the only measure of how adult mental health services are performing. There is no measure of quality of care or of outcomes and, as the Audit Scotland report found, that does not amount to sufficient Government oversight over service performance.

We cannot debate the issues around mental health care without considering the workforce crisis in the NHS. Vacancies for mental health nurses have more than doubled between 2017 and 2023. The number of people choosing to study mental health nursing has failed to fill the number of funded places at Scotland’s universities in recent years. In addition, a quarter of consultant psychiatry posts were vacant at the start of this year, with boards spending almost £30 million on locums in 2022-23. Health services can exist and thrive only if we have the staff to deliver them, and urgent action is required from the Government to deliver a recruitment strategy that does not just attract people into mental health care but retains them.

Another concern that is raised in the committee’s report is the ambiguity on how to access support. Although there are local support options, patients and primary care services are not always aware of all the resources or services that are available in their area. With a cluttered landscape of NHS boards, health and social care partnerships, councils and the third sector all providing myriad services, we need to ensure that the suite of support options that are available is communicated simply and clearly.

We also know that, even with many forms of support being available, access to help varies across Scotland. The situation is particularly difficult for people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people in rural areas and people living in poverty. For example, people in the most deprived areas are three times more likely to end up in hospital for mental health issues. That preventable disparity should shame us all.

Both the committee report and the Audit Scotland report reference the Scottish Government's commitment to ensure that every GP surgery has access to a mental health and wellbeing service by 2026. I think that, across the chamber, we are agreed that support via primary care is crucial. A Scottish Action for Mental Health survey found that six out of 10 people who had tried to access support through their GP or specialist service since 2021 faced challenges or impediments.

The Government's progress on delivering on mental health and wellbeing services in primary care has been stagnant. That commitment was made in 2021, but in 2024 the services have yet to be fully established. The promise of a primary care and mental health and wellbeing services fund to support delivery never came to pass, despite the health and social care partnerships planning implementation for almost a year. The pledge to recruit an additional 1,000 mental health workers has not been met, either. I think that ministers will understand why we question how they can expect to be taken seriously on mental health policy when their actions since 2021 amount to a string of broken promises.

In the absence of a clear pathway for where to access help, and without the support via primary care that patients were promised, people who need support are not getting the early interventions that they require, and that is loading more cost into the system in the long run. In turn, people are reaching a crisis point, which is having an adverse impact on their health outcomes and on other services. As the committee noted, Police Scotland is now in effect "filling the gaps" in the mental health care system. The chief constable, Jo Farrell, estimated earlier this month that a mental health call comes in every three to four minutes. That is one of the many examples of why we need to shift from responding to crisis to a model of prevention, which enables people to access the support that they need, locally and when they need it, before the issue spirals into something more complicated.

The community link worker programme is proof of the power of community-based social prescribing as a prevention tool. Link workers play a crucial role in providing practical support to help people with their mental health, and it is regrettable that funding for those valuable roles is subject to the ambiguity of short-term annual funding awards. I welcomed the Scottish Government's intervention to protect the roles of link workers in Glasgow last year, but a sustainable funding model for those roles and other support that is delivered by the third sector must be considered for the longer term.

I sincerely hope that the committee's report acts as a catalyst for action from the Scottish Government. Regrettably, the mental health budget has been frozen and cut in-year for the past two consecutive years. The psychological therapies target has never been routinely met. The Government is not on track to meet its target of 10 per cent of NHS spend going to mental health. In fact, an £180 million budget shortfall has been estimated.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney, you need to conclude.

Paul Sweeney: Action is urgently needed, and I sincerely hope that the comprehensive work of the committee ends the inertia of the Government and compels it to take that action.

16:17

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, extend my gratitude to the Public Audit Committee and its clerks for their work in the production of the report. I also thank those who participated in the evidence sessions and in the important efforts that were made to prepare the report by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission, which informed much of the committee's work. The Public Audit Committee report offers key recommendations and conclusions based on comprehensive evidence, and it serves as a reminder that we must do more to support mental health in Scotland.

The report highlights that the Royal College of Psychiatrists has pointed to a consistent increase in the demand for mental health services over the past three years. There has been a specific increase in certain conditions, such as neurodivergent disorders, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Its evidence points to the fact that, in some cases, referrals have increased by between 700 and 1,000 per cent. It is undeniable that some of that increase results from a better awareness of symptoms and, to a certain extent, from people who seek diagnosis being less stigmatised than before. We know, however, that there is a long way to go around stigma. For those who are waiting, we need to see what else can be done so that there is no further rise in the trend of people seeking a private diagnosis for many of those conditions.

The Poverty Alliance also conducted a snapshot survey that identified that the increasing cost of living is negatively affecting the population's mental health. Both testimonies serve as a poignant reminder that the findings and recommendations of the committee's report must be taken seriously, and they point to the scale of the emergency.

However, undeniable progress is being made in places, and several initiatives are worth highlighting. One of those initiatives, which is laid out in the report, is a project in my region called Chris's House. Chris's House has established a relationship with the police in Lanarkshire to highlight the services that the initiative offers to support anyone who the police have been called to who is in crisis or approaching crisis. The services and wraparound care that it offers are incredible, and the link between statutory and voluntary services is vital, especially around suicide and those in crisis who need support. As we know, the pathways are difficult to navigate but, for a person in a moment of crisis, that is almost impossible. We therefore need to ensure that the follow-up care beyond such moments is there quickly to support people and that the person in crisis is not required to go looking for that support.

Local work with liaison groups, hospitals and the police has yielded encouraging results.

Neil Gray: Through the interaction that I have had in my constituency capacity, I am aware of the fantastic work that Chris's House does. I wish to reflect again on the question that Jackie Baillie posed to me about the difference that we can make on mental health by having proper collaboration between the community and voluntary sector and statutory services and with private sector innovation. That can answer the question that Gillian Mackay has posed about how we can continue to sustain improvement through the community and voluntary sector.

Gillian Mackay: Absolutely. I will come on to say more about the third sector and the support that it needs, although, looking at the time, that will probably be in my closing speech.

We know that several inequalities remain across Scotland. I want to touch on the issue of data in particular. There are specific and on-going issues with the quality and depth of the data that we record and, therefore, with the data that we can rely on to plan and target services. That situation is not unique to mental health services but, given the acute pressure on those, it is essential that we collect and process the data that we need. The committee's report refers to

"the lack of data that is held by the Scottish Government, IJBs and others 'to fully understand demand for mental healthcare'"

and makes the point that

"comprehensive, good-quality data is essential for assessing demand and planning services".

The report further states:

"information about demand for mental healthcare in Scotland only covers those already accessing or attempting to access some mental health services."

Therefore, improvement in the collection of quality data is needed. I echo the report's concern that the lack of such data means that there is no effective means of measuring outcomes or the impact that substantial investment in services is having on the ground.

Once again, I thank the committee, its clerks and those who gave evidence.

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

16:22

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): As a member of the Public Audit Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this debate on adult mental health. I thank all the people who participated in the process and contributed to the production of the report.

As we all know, mental health across the board is a major issue that this country faces. Most particularly since the Covid pandemic, we have seen a substantial change to the mental wellbeing of the people of Scotland and, indeed, people across Europe. That behavioural change seems to be in part driven by poor resilience in the face of the adverse conditions in which Brexit and the cost of living crisis in particular have placed us. Fragile mental health makes an individual vulnerable, and it can mean that they struggle to cope with day-to-day activities.

Of course, there is a positive element in all this. In today's Scotland, there is a greater willingness to speak about mental health, and more people are prepared to talk about their own mental health. That is a good thing, and it needs to be encouraged. Perhaps that new openness has contributed to people recognising mental health issues and being open to seeking support in greater numbers than in the past.

At times, the Public Audit Committee had difficulty making sense of how well funds that are targeted at adult mental health are spent and how effectively they are used. As is so often the case in the public sector, the data that is key to decisions on where to focus efforts and resources in order to make the biggest impact simply is not there or is inconsistent in collection and format across the country. Significant gaps in data will impact on the ability to make well-informed decisions about the delivery of mental health services.

Over the years, the Scottish Government has rightly had a strong focus on adult mental health. That is evidenced by the increased spend by NHS boards since 2017-18 of £1.2 billion, which is a real-terms increase of 16 per cent, and an increased spend by councils in the same period of

£224.7 million, which is a real-terms increase of 14 per cent. The mental health directorate budget has increased by £290.2 million since 2017-18, representing a real-terms increase of 356 per cent. However, is that enough? Is it being spent on the most effective areas? Without data, it is very difficult to be sure.

There has also been a heavy reliance on the police service to provide coverage with some mental health issues. I have heard that as high as 85 per cent of police call-outs involve assistance with a mental health issue. That is not an ideal use of police resources, nor are the police trained to manage mental health. An alternative model needs to be developed and implemented in answer to that dissipation of police time and effort. I am pleased that Police Scotland and its partners are looking at possible solutions to better manage the issue, and I look forward to the outcome.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that every general practice has access to a mental health and wellbeing service by 2026. That will be a game changer in supporting adult mental health. My only fear is that the cost might well be substantial and that, with Scotland's budget cuts putting pressure on public finances, ambition might exceed the available cash.

The situation overall is exacerbated by a shortage of trained staff to provide the support that is needed. The vacancy level for general psychiatry consultants is the highest of all medical and dental consultant roles in Scotland. Indeed, there has been a reduction in the number of psychiatrists in the past five to 10 years, whereas an increase might have been expected to meet demand. Vacancy rates are running at 30 per cent, and 20 per cent of the consultant workforce is made up of locums. That makes meeting the needs of adults who suffer from poor mental health difficult and expensive. I hope that the Scottish Government's workforce planning will help to address that issue.

There is no doubt that poor mental health among adults is a growing problem, but I am heartened by the Scottish Government recognising it as such and seeking ways to address the issue. There is no easy solution in the short term but, with long-term workforce planning, resources can be deployed to improve service availability.

I commend the report.

16:26

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I offer my thanks to Audit Scotland for the work that it has put into the report and to members of the Public Audit Committee for their scrutiny work.

I also pay tribute to healthcare professionals who work in this field of medicine, who often have tough and very stressful jobs. They do so much work with scant resources, and that should be applauded.

I echo Colin Beattie's comments about the openness for discussion in our society. That can only be a good thing. We are not yet there in how open we need to be about mental health, but it is positive that we, along with the third sector, Governments and charities, are going in the right direction.

In the short time that I have, I will focus my remarks on some of the issues with access to mental health support services that affect people who live in rural communities.

It is clear from the report and from comments from charities such as Scottish Action for Mental Health that we need whole-system reform to how mental health support is designed, delivered, resourced and accessed. That last part is particularly critical, especially in light of the fact that the number of people who were seen by a mental health professional within 18 weeks fell between 2022 and 2023 in most health board areas, including many of the health boards in the Highlands and Islands region, which I serve. During that period, the number of people who were seen within 18 weeks fell by 15.1 per cent in NHS Grampian and by 6.4 per cent in NHS Western Isles. That is not good enough, and I can only imagine that the reality behind those statistics is huge and overwhelming pressures on staff.

There are also issues in the way in which people access mental health support services. The data highlighted in Audit Scotland's report shows that there is a postcode lottery as to whether someone can be seen face to face or remotely. For example, in 2022, 74 per cent of mental health appointments in the Western Isles were by telephone or video call, and just 9 per cent were in person. In Orkney, the percentage of appointments that were by telephone or video was even higher, at 94 per cent. However, in Shetland, 64 per cent of appointments were made in person, and the figure for NHS Highland was 48 per cent.

Although it is welcome that some people are receiving treatment by a healthcare professional, the report highlights comments that three quarters of people—75 per cent—felt that face-to-face support was by far the better option. Indeed, according to the report, in 2022, most psychological therapies appointments across Scotland took place digitally or by telephone. That is not to say that different models of treatment delivery are right or wrong, but it is clear from the evidence that people feel a greater benefit from in-person treatment.

The report highlights that not all NHS boards routinely offer patients the choice of a face-to-face appointment and that some health boards are developing new services that will operate entirely remotely. Although new initiatives are clearly welcome—especially if more patients can be seen—we must do more to ensure that health boards can still offer face-to-face appointments where appropriate. That is particularly the case given that, in 2021, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities published “Enabling, Connecting and Empowering: Care in the Digital Age—Scotland’s Digital Health and Care Strategy”, which stated:

“People will not be forced to use a digital service if it is not right for them”.

The report highlights a number of factors that affected the type of appointment that was offered to patients. Those included the availability of clinical space, clinical need and whether people were affected by digital exclusion. It is clear that more needs to be done to support service providers, particularly those in more rural and remote parts of Scotland, to enable them to offer patients a range of treatment options.

That is just a snapshot of some of the issues that are faced by my constituents in rural areas and people in other parts of Scotland. I have not even touched on the funding of mental health link workers in primary care practices or the wider conversation about system reform. A more extensive debate is needed on the issue.

We need a more modern, efficient and local approach to delivering mental health services in communities. That will be delivered only by listening to healthcare professionals on the ground and to our constituents who desperately need those services.

16:30

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The Audit Scotland report, which was issued last September and which was the focus of our committee’s work, had four key messages for the Government. Those messages focused on the difficulties in assessing the impact that significant funding increases were achieving due to the absence of good-quality data, access issues across Scotland for communities that are most in need of mental health services, the need for clear oversight of service provision as a whole to allow for better planning for better outcomes, and a review of the progress that has been made to date against previous commitments.

As members might expect, the Public Audit Committee explored those issues in further detail, and we produced our own report, which contained no fewer than 29 comments and

recommendations, the great majority of which, I am pleased to say, the Government accepts and is taking action on to make improvements.

I should note that demand for mental health support services has increased significantly in recent years. SAMH reported a 50 per cent increase during the pandemic, and the number of calls to the NHS 24 mental health hub on 111 shot up by more than 400 per cent, from around 2,000 calls per month to more than 11,000 calls per month. The mental health service option became a 24-hour service, which partly explains that rise. However, that also demonstrates the level of demand. Let us not overlook either the impact that the prolonged cost of living crisis is having on the mental health of a sizeable proportion of our community.

On resources and hard cash, the Scottish Government is investing a total of around £1.3 billion to support mental health services. As the Auditor General for Scotland noted, the allocation to the mental health directorate itself has gone up from £63 million to £290 million—my colleague Colin Beattie mentioned that. The difficulty for all of us is to be able to assess the impact of that increased spend and to be sure that the public are getting the services that they need. That was clearly reflected in the committee’s work and recognised by the minister in her substantial response to the report.

Variation in access to services featured prominently during the committee’s work, and there was some discussion of how various communities, and minorities in particular, are served by the support systems that we have in place. The committee heard that our ethnic minority communities often face greater challenges in finding and accessing services where they live, and that was a cause for concern.

It was also noted that people who live in our more deprived communities are three times more likely to end up in hospital as a result of mental health issues—I believe that another member mentioned that earlier. Therefore, the need to target service support to those communities that are most in need is a clear issue, and I know that the Government has taken that matter up directly.

It is also interesting that digital access to services featured in the report. Wide variations were seen across Scotland. Some of our mainland health boards had extremely low face-to-face service provision. However, I am delighted to note that Ayrshire and Arran had the highest level of face-to-face provision in Scotland, with more than 86 per cent of people receiving face-to-face consultations, compared with the average in Scotland of about 40 per cent. People must be given a choice about the type of consultation that

they receive, and our health boards must deliver that.

The need to have clear and general oversight of the entire service provision is essential if we are to understand and deliver on our commitments. The Auditor General and the committee recognised that the complexity of fragmentation in the system, with multiple bodies providing support and funding, not only impacts on accountability but makes it more difficult to be sure that services are being developed to fully meet people's needs.

Finally, on reviewing progress of the 10-year strategy to 2027, there was a bit of a mixed picture. That is not to say that good work is not being done—it most certainly is, and we have all seen and witnessed some fantastic work going on in our constituencies across Scotland. Better data and access arrangements, co-ordinated oversight and engagement with the public, who rely on us for that support, are the keys to delivering the improvements in mental health that I am sure we all seek for the coming years.

16:35

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the Public Audit Committee and the clerks for the detailed report, which I hope will make a positive contribution to improving adult mental health services across Scotland. There is much in the report, but with only four minutes, I will focus on only a few of the areas that are covered.

The committee heard compelling evidence that demand for mental health care continues to rise, which is adding to the pressure that an adult mental health system that is already under significant strain faces. Given that strain, I pay tribute to all those who work in the sector, whether in acute or community-based services, or in community-based third sector organisations, all of whom do a great job, often under immense pressure.

For many people, when they feel ill their first port of call will be their general practitioner. The committee recognised the key role that GPs play in supporting people's mental health. However, as we—and, I suggest, most people in Scotland—know, GP services are under constant pressure, with increasing numbers of people finding it more difficult to access their GP.

The Government made a commitment to ensure that every general practice has access to a multidisciplinary mental health and wellbeing service by 2026, and it backed that up with a commitment to provide £40 million a year. The questions that have been asked by Scottish Action for Mental Health are important, so perhaps the minister will give clarify the position when she responds to the debate. Is the Scottish

Government still committed to the full roll-out of a primary care multidisciplinary mental health and wellbeing service by 2026? Is the Scottish Government still committed to providing £40 million of annual funding to support primary care multidisciplinary mental health and wellbeing services by 2026? When will a fully costed delivery plan be published, as has been recommended by the committee?

In order to get a full range of services based at community level, we must have good local infrastructure in place. When it comes to their health centres, sadly, the people of Lochgelly and Kincardine know all too well about SNP broken promises. I understand about the very challenging financial times in which we operate, but the committee makes a clear and important point when it states that

"It is crucial that the Scottish Government publishes a costed delivery plan setting out the wider funding and workforce that will be needed to achieve its aim of establishing sustainable and effective MHWPCS across Scotland by 2026."

The report also states that

"The Committee is clear that it is not the role of police officers to 'fill the gap' in the mental healthcare system."

I listened carefully to the interview that the chief constable gave last week. She was clear that we need more specialist mental health services that police officers can call on to provide the care and support that are needed, which will allow officers to focus on core policing.

As Change Mental Health states:

"The Scottish Government need to clarify what role the police will play in supporting those in a mental health crisis, and work with statutory services and the third sector to fill these gaps."

My message today is that we can and we must do more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick, who will give the last speech before we move to closing speeches.

16:39

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the committee debate on such an important report. I know that many constituents care deeply about the issue. I have met, across the Highlands and Islands, many local organisations that I know are making a difference. From Mind Your Head in Shetland to Centred (Scotland) in Inverness, I know that much work is going on that meaningfully impacts on the lives of people in my region who are suffering from mental illness.

A visit that I will never forget was a visit to the distress brief intervention programme offices in

Inverness, where I heard about the flexible support that is being offered to people who are in immediate need. I heard from staff how important it was for them to help, how they went above and beyond, and how, in the words of one, they do not understand what happened to people before the service went live. I genuinely believe in the distress brief intervention model: it is exactly the kind of flexible support in a crisis that I argued for when I was a mental health campaigner, as a teenager.

I have noticed that politicians are excellent at talking about awareness and prevention. We love a public awareness campaign, having leaflets and wearing badges during mental health awareness week, but we cannot prevent every mental health crisis. People will continue to suffer from trauma and people who have lifelong mental health conditions will continue to need support for—I hope—a very long life ahead of them. Traumatic events will continue to happen no matter how many safeguards we put in place to guard against them. There are natural disasters, accidents, bereaved children, traumatic births and bad actors. Events have happened elsewhere in the world to people who move to Scotland and need our help. We cannot stop all the wrong things in the world, so mental health services are necessary.

Audit Scotland highlighted that the target of 10 per cent of front-line NHS spend being on mental health has not been achieved. That needs urgent work. Its report also talks about the need for 24-hour access when immediate care is necessary. We know that all services—including the third sector, policing and council services—are stretched by mental health crisis presentations. Front-line support by people who are qualified to deal with mental health crises is needed. The Audit Scotland report suggests that it is not the role of police officers to fill the gap in mental health care. That is true, but we must also recognise, as Change Mental Health has pointed out, that people who are in emergency situations need support. Someone who is an immediate danger to themselves or others cannot be put on a waiting list. That takes me back to the distress brief intervention programme, which I firmly believe should be invested in more because we know that it is helping with co-ordination of services.

Police cannot deliver psychological support or help a person to work through their trauma, but there is absolutely a role for them in identifying, protecting and correctly referring people who are having mental health crises. We should not shy away from that. As we discuss the great pressure that the police force is under, we can recognise that its role can be defined and agreed to, because the police will interact with those crises.

Trauma-informed support across the board still needs attention and training resources, because people are still regularly reporting that they are having to share their traumatic experiences over and over with different authorities. That will compound their trauma and encourage dissociation and distrust of the services that they will need moving forward, rather than support them to process what has happened to them. I have been through a mental health crisis, so I know how critical the initial support is, how life changing a poor reaction or a thoughtless comment can be, and how transformative the right non-judgmental support can be. It is important that we keep improving crisis services and that we make sure that, no matter who the person runs into first when they are in crisis—the police, accident and emergency services, social workers or the Scottish Ambulance Service—they are supported to access the right service and help to recover, whatever that looks like for them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I note with some disappointment that a member who has participated in the debate is not here for the start of closing speeches, which is a discourtesy to other members who have spoken in the debate and to the chair.

16:39

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): In closing, I will emphasise the critical points that have been raised by the committee's report, and by the various stakeholders that informed it.

Richard Leonard mentioned taking a preventative approach to mental health, with which I whole-heartedly agree. We need to keep people well in order to ensure that we prevent them from ending up in secondary services, and that we give them a better quality of life. The preventative approach has some new branches, but many of the levers—including access to good quality housing, fair work, fair pay, and all the things that we know make lives better—fall outside the portfolios that we are talking about in the debate.

I hope that the cabinet secretary, ministers and others in the Government will ensure that decisions that are made by the Government will seek to enhance and improve mental health care. I recognise Emma Roddick's comments that not every mental health condition or crisis can be prevented, but we should be doing everything that we can do to ensure that support is there when people need it.

Although several incentives have been brought forward to enhance access to mental health services across Scotland, the report highlights the importance of addressing broader inequalities and

the fact that many current incentives lack detail. “HMICS Thematic review of policing mental health in Scotland” shows that police are shouldering the responsibilities that should be shared by a more integrated system.

A whole-system response is necessary for effective mental health services, and the committee’s report also makes it clear that tackling mental health inequalities extends beyond the healthcare system. The chief executive of NHS Scotland shared how health boards can support local communities through employment, procurement and leveraging of the broader policies that are focused on tackling inequalities and poverty.

I also want to touch briefly on the recommendations about GPs and people contacting their GPs. I agree that, for many people, repeating the story about or the symptoms of their mental ill health might deter them from seeking help. I also agree that guidance should be produced, but it should go further than just general practices, so that we are not retraumatising people purely so that they can get an appointment or help. The Royal College of General Practitioners has asked that guidance and any other innovations be allowed time to be implemented. I echo its call for protected learning time for GPs and their teams.

The third sector is delivering a huge number of services and support, but as the committee highlights, funding and certainty about that funding are a barrier to how those services and support are delivered. I was pleased to visit a project on nature prescriptions in Calderwood country park last week with Voluntary Action South Lanarkshire, RSPB Scotland and other partners. The project is fantastic and I hope that other Central Scotland members—and perhaps even the minister and the cabinet secretary—will consider going to see it. It highlighted to me how difficult the current funding regime for third sector organisations is because of the need for them to reinvent the wheel to access funds without knowing when funding decisions will be made.

Some of those whom we spoke to on Skye as part of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee’s inquiry into remote and rural healthcare could not even get people to reply to emails about when funding could be expected. The mix of support that the third sector provides is phenomenal, so we need to recognise that in the way in which such organisations are treated and supported.

I also believe that, for there to be meaningful reform, the Scottish Government must prioritise mental health funding by meeting its target to increase spending and ensure that at least 10 per

cent of front-line NHS spending is dedicated to mental health care.

I remain encouraged by several commitments that have been made by the Scottish Government in its response to several of the shortcomings that are addressed in the report. However, I hope that that translates into concrete action to reinvigorate the mental health care system, which we encourage our constituents to rely on.

16:47

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I echo colleagues in expressing my thanks to the convener, Richard Leonard, and to all members of the Public Audit Committee, together with the clerks, for producing the report. I also offer my thanks to those who gave evidence to the committee and offered their important insights into the realities on the ground.

Like so many of Scotland’s public services, adult mental health services are in a state of acute crisis after 17 years of the SNP Government. Paul Sweeney was right to talk about prevention because, across our communities, people are struggling to access the mental health support that they so desperately need. What makes me angry is the fact that, although the SNP Government has made promise after promise to take action on mental health, it feels like empty words. In the past two financial years, mental health funding has been clawed back to the tune of almost £70 million. With those sorts of decisions, is it any wonder that we are having today’s debate?

The Public Audit Committee report on adult mental health details a litany of failures that have been argued about across the chamber. It is clear that urgent and meaningful reform must be implemented if mental health services in Scotland are to survive.

Neil Gray: We have doubled our investment in mental health services. Now that we know that there will be an election on 4 July, are we going to see an incoming Labour Government making greater investment in our public services, so that we can continue to make improvements? Can we get that exclusive from Jackie Baillie today?

Jackie Baillie: I am surprised that the cabinet secretary even has to ask that question. Labour created the NHS, Labour will defend it and Labour will invest in it.

When the SNP Government had record levels of funding from a previous Labour UK Government, it squandered that money and spent it on other things. Scotland used to spend 22 per cent more money per head on health than England did. Today, that gap has fallen to 3 per cent. That has

happened on the SNP's watch. It has not invested in the NHS, and the public will find it out for that.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No, thank you.

I welcome Gillian Mackay's suggestion about further collaboration with the voluntary sector, but that should have happened before now.

Alex Rowley and Graham Simpson raised the lack of service provision and its impact on policing. That is not new. The report's findings echo an Audit Scotland report on adult mental health from September 2023, which highlighted the same themes and the same issues. That report came out eight months ago, but Scotland's mental health services remain in a state of crisis, and little action appears to have been taken to address the situation. I sincerely hope that the Scottish Government heeds the recommendations of the Public Audit Committee's report with more urgency than it has shown to date.

To begin with, better data collection is vital. Audit Scotland and the Public Audit Committee covered the need for that. Failure to collate proper data is a theme that runs throughout Scotland's struggling health and social care system, and it is all too characteristic of a Government that seeks to obscure the truth and hide the facts. Without proper data collection, the Government cannot hope to address the issues that Audit Scotland and the Public Audit Committee have highlighted in relation to investment in services.

The Government pledged to increase mental health spending by 25 per cent over the parliamentary session and said that at least 10 per cent of front-line NHS spend would go to mental health. How are we doing on that? The latest data from Public Health Scotland shows that, in 2022-23, only 8.53 per cent of NHS expenditure went to mental health—again, that is a decrease on the previous year, and it is lower than the equivalent spend of 14 per cent in England and 11 per cent in Wales.

We have had enough of the spin and the warm words. The Government must tell Parliament when it will meet its own target that at least 10 per cent of front-line NHS spend will go to mental health. That is important because properly funding primary care and GP services is essential if we are to address the mental health crisis. Related to that is the retention and expansion of clinical link workers. The Government should give a cast-iron commitment to long-term funding for clinical link workers if it is serious about tackling the concerns in the report.

I am conscious of time, Presiding Officer. Richard Leonard was right to emphasise the

inequality of provision. For people who are living in poverty, for people who are living in rural areas and for ethnic minorities, access to mental health support remains slow and overcomplicated. The scale of the crisis cannot be overstated. After years of poor workforce planning, the workforce is at breaking point as it struggles to meet demand.

Accepting the Public Audit Committee's report and implementing the recommendations as a matter of urgency is the right place to start, but the report demonstrates that people in Scotland have been failed by both the UK and Scottish Governments. It is time for change, and that opportunity is with us now. Thank goodness for that.

16:53

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The statistics are sobering, and the Public Audit Committee's report is damning. In any given year, one in four people experience mental health problems. Life expectancy for people with prolonged mental illness is significantly shorter. The suicide rate is consistently higher in Scotland than it is in Northern Ireland, Wales and England. The number of female deaths by suicide is rising. The cost of poor mental health to the Scottish economy is close to £9 billion.

Scotland is experiencing a mental health crisis, and the healthcare system under the SNP Government is simply not equipped to cope. Demand is rising, but capacity is not. Too many people are languishing on waiting lists for treatment. Millions of pounds are being spent on locum psychiatrists because health boards cannot recruit to permanent positions.

It is therefore welcome and necessary that mental health services across Scotland are being scrutinised by Audit Scotland and the Public Audit Committee. That work shines a much-needed light on the pressures in the mental health care system and the lack of progress by successive SNP Governments. It is clear that the SNP does not have a grip, from the lack of data to support the delivery of services to the barriers that people continue to experience as they try to access care. Patchy provision, too few face-to-face appointments and unachievable policy commitments have defined the SNP's record on mental health to date.

Meanwhile, real-terms spending on mental health by the Scottish Government has reduced. Third sector organisations such as the Scottish Men's Sheds Association have been forced to wait anxiously for news of funding from the SNP Government. The first men's shed started in 2013 in Westhill, in my region of Aberdeenshire, and it has done vital work to improve men's mental

health and wellbeing, but there is no plan in place for long-term, sustainable funding from the Scottish Government.

When I hosted a round-table event on perinatal mental health in October last year, the message was the same—the third sector is stepping into the breach, but there is no certainty over funding. Organisations are worried about recruiting staff to meet demand when they might not be able to pay those staff in the next financial year. Last week, I spoke to one GP surgery in my region that told me that it had nowhere to signpost anyone to in the community for mental health support, because the service had closed. That is dire. There must be a better way for the SNP Government to support such organisations.

Audit Scotland's report highlighted specific concerns about access to mental health care in rural areas, which I strongly echo. The report quoted a rural resident who said:

"If you live in a rural community or outside of a catchment area you have no services available. You try to access the services where they are available but you're up against a brick wall."

The reality on the ground is that there is a postcode lottery in mental health care.

There is no mother and baby unit outside the central belt, which means that new mums in serious mental health distress in my region must leave their families and travel miles for specialist treatment. According to the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, only two out of the 14 NHS boards currently meet UK-wide quality standards for specialist perinatal mental health care.

The centralisation of services is having a massive impact. The Mulberry unit for mental health at Stracathro hospital in Brechin closed in 2017 because of staffing pressures. Services relocated to the Carseview centre in Dundee, which is some 35 miles away and involves up to a two-hour journey on public transport one way. The decision to close the Mulberry unit was not about providing a superior service at Carseview; we know from David Strang's damning report into mental health services in NHS Tayside that there were serious and enduring issues in the delivery of those services when the Mulberry unit was closed. The people of Angus have been unfairly impacted as a result.

The cabinet secretary has said that he is open to ideas: I would like to ask him and the minister to meet Nicky Connor, who is the new chief executive of NHS Tayside, to review David Strang's report and its recommendations, whose implementation is still outstanding. As I have said, there has not been nearly enough progress in implementing the Strang report's recommendations and not enough oversight of

that process, either. That is just not good enough. We have a new cabinet secretary, so this is a new opportunity; I ask that he please listen.

Politicians and policy makers have long called for parity between mental health and physical health. That ambition formed the foundation of the SNP Government's mental health strategy back in 2017. However, that ambition cannot be achieved when mental health services are at saturation point.

It is time for the SNP Government to stop paying lip service to mental health. It must act urgently to implement the recommendations from Audit Scotland and the Public Audit Committee and support Scotland's mental health services.

16:59

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank members for their invaluable contributions to the debate. As the cabinet secretary outlined in his opening remarks, the work undertaken by the Public Audit Committee and Audit Scotland on adult mental health services across Scotland has been extensive. I thank the committee, the convener and all who gave evidence to its inquiry.

Whenever mental health is the topic for discussion, I truly believe that we can all come to Parliament in a collaborative spirit. The debate is often robust and passionate, which is exactly how it should be, but we all make our contributions on the basis of a sincere shared belief that the system should and can be improved.

There should be varied support for people who need help with their mental health, at all levels of need. Reducing stigma should continue to be foundational so that people can ask for help without fear of judgment. The performance of clinical services such as child and adolescent mental health services and psychological therapies should be carefully scrutinised so that we can continue to improve it.

We should also focus on continuing to expand community-based provision, peer support and mental health resources in primary care. Overall, we should continue to tilt the balance to early intervention and prevention while valuing our specialist services. Those points come through very clearly in the committee's report, and they are also key themes in our mental health and wellbeing strategy.

We are wholly focused on making progress towards the strategy's outcomes and, in turn, its vision. Delivery of that vision is dependent on cross-Government and cross-society collaboration, and we are working to deliver that. The strategy outlines a blueprint of what "good"

looks like. That covers improving access to and the quality of mental health services, expanding the range of support that is available to meet emerging need, effectively aligning our workforce and improving the amount and quality of data available. That echoes the themes that came through in both the committee's and Audit Scotland's reports.

The theme of accountability ran through the committee's evidence sessions, and I recognise the importance of the Government being transparent about progress. We have committed to establishing a mental health and wellbeing leadership board, which will be jointly chaired by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to oversee our joint strategy and delivery plan. The board, which will contain representation from across the whole system, including across Government, will meet for the first time in early summer.

The committee in its report has asked us to be up front about progress, and we will be. The leadership board will play a crucial role in delivering that. A number of people have raised the issue of workforce. With substantial investment, we have record numbers of staff providing more varied support and services to a larger number of people than ever before.

On the issue of transparency, NHS Education for Scotland publishes detailed quarterly statistics on the make-up of the mental health workforce for psychology and CAMHS. There is currently a review of mental health nursing, which will be completed by the end of the year, and I am happy to update Parliament on that.

We recognise that there are global shortages in the medical specialty of psychiatry. Work is on-going to ensure that we attract the brightest and best to the profession. Although I am pleased that there was a 100 per cent fill rate for trainees last year, I am absolutely clear that all is not equal in every specialty within psychiatry. Work is on-going to ensure that we have the right workforce for the future.

A number of people raised the issue of the police. I recognise the impact of mental health-related incidents on policing, and I am grateful to officers for their work every day to support those who are in distress or experiencing mental ill health. In a rural area such as the one that I represent, police will always be part of the front-line response to people who are in distress.

The partnership group that we have set up is multidisciplinary. It has representatives from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland, who will drive activity to ensure that resources are deployed appropriately and reduce unnecessary demand on officers.

On tangible progress that has already been made and is being built on, the group will implement the enhanced mental health pathway, which allows Police Scotland to pass on calls from people who need mental health or distress support to the NHS 24 mental health hub. That is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It will enable call-handling staff—

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Maree Todd: Yes, certainly.

Graham Simpson: I thank the minister for taking the intervention. I am interested to hear more about that, because we need tangible action so that police officers are not spending so much time tied up with dealing with people with mental health issues. When can we expect to see that action?

Maree Todd: As I said, some action is already under way, so that police officers can ensure that the people who are asking them for support and help can be referred to NHS 24. There is an ability for call-handling staff at Police Scotland to make referrals to the distress brief intervention programme, which we have heard about. That is an incredible resource that has not been available before, and it is an alternative to sending police officers out in response to a call. More than 62,000 people in Scotland have been able to access distress brief intervention since it was started, and referrals from Police Scotland are steadily rising. Local mental health clinicians are available 24 hours a day—we need to increase awareness of that. Police Scotland has access to that support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so that the people who are contacting them can be enabled to access local clinical support.

On access to GP appointments, members are aware that there have been substantial changes in the primary care workforce. Although GPs are still the cornerstone of primary care, many other disciplines are now available through GP practices, some of which specialise in mental health. Receptionists are asking questions about the nature of calls so that they can ensure that people are able to access the right professional on the team.

I would love to say more about digital access, which has made such a difference in my constituency, but I am running short of time. Digital access must be by choice. In areas such as mine, it enhances access to services, but I agree that it is not for everyone.

I repeat the offer that was made by the cabinet secretary by saying that I am always willing to engage constructively across the Parliament to put party politics to one side on areas in which we think we might be able to go further to address the

issues that we all know exist. That is the case for issues that were identified in the committee's report and in the Audit Scotland report. In the spirit of collaboration, we will move forward together.

The Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Greene to wind up the debate on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

17:08

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I apologise for my croaky voice; I will see whether I can make it through the speech. Contrary to convention, I am also happy to take interventions while I speak on behalf of the committee. I am the deputy convener of the Public Audit Committee, and I regret that the debate was cut short today due to additional business, because it is so important.

Off the back of mental health awareness week, this is a timely debate. The Public Audit Committee is often undervalued in the Parliament. The report was frank, stark, well constructed, cross-party and unanimous. That is important. It is so important that we all talk about mental health and that we lead by example to break down stigma and taboos around mental health. I hope that I play my part in that—members may have heard me on BBC Scotland last week.

The debate has rather starkly highlighted the many challenges that adult mental health services in Scotland face. I summarise the current situation as, indeed, did the report, simply as a growing crisis. However, the way in which the Government chooses to respond to the crisis will impact the lives of many for decades to come. There is absolute consensus in the chamber about which actions the Scottish Government needs to prioritise, about the rise in demand and about the many gaps in delivery, because the causes of poor mental health are varied, complex and interconnected. It is also clear that many people are falling through gaps in the system, and that is not good enough.

I will turn to some of the specific issues that were raised in the debate. The convener of the committee, in his opening comments, talked about the rise in demand, citing the pandemic as a recent cause of strain and, of course, the current cost of living crisis, which has put more pressure on people and services.

A rise in demand, on the one hand, provides proof and evidence that fewer people are suffering in silence and alone, because society is breaking down taboos and stigma over mental health. It should have parity with physical health. However, the increase in demand is reflected in an increased strain on services, which are not always resourced or funded to match that demand.

Waiting times are simply unacceptable across too many metrics. Although any progress on those is welcome, the sector faces a workforce crisis, and we all know it. If the people are not there, nor is the support. The committee's report raises serious concerns that demand has not been met for far too many of our fellow Scots.

When it comes to out-of-hours support, as Graham Simpson said, it is too often left to Police Scotland to deal with incidents where someone is facing a mental health crisis or is in distress. My experience on the Criminal Justice Committee vindicates that view. It is now widely accepted that, when other services are simply not there, particularly out of hours, people ring the police, and the police are obliged to respond to those calls. The number of police incidents relating to mental health increased by 62 per cent over four years alone, and the cost of that is more than £14 billion per year.

The new chief constable, Jo Farrell, has been clear that the status quo cannot continue in that regard, but we see no firm pathway towards reducing that burden, as Alex Rowley said. We are encouraged by evidence that some local policing partnerships are reducing the impact on police at a local level. That approach could be rolled out on a national basis.

Of course, we looked at other triage approach pilots that police forces elsewhere in the UK are trying and which have proven to be successful. I urge the Government, on a cross-portfolio basis, to learn from any successes in that regard. I am pleased that a multi-agency group has been established but, as we heard from members on our front bench, it cannot simply be a talking shop, because tangible results are what matter—as in that waiting lists must come down and suicide rates must start falling.

Others have mentioned the issue of data. Data sounds relatively dull in a debate such as this, but it is the concerning lack of data in relation to adult mental health services that worried the committee. We discovered that we do not really know the full extent of demand for mental health services.

More concerning is our conclusion that we do not know whether investment is delivering the intended outcomes. Sadly, that is a common critique from Audit Scotland across a wide range of portfolios. When VOX gave evidence to the committee, it said:

"It seems ridiculous that we do not collect that information and data or have that evidence about how things are working".—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 9 November 2023; c 29.]

That is important, because gaps in data will have serious consequences when it comes to designing future services. We need the ability to make

informed decisions about the delivery of mental health services.

We welcome the commitment to develop a mental health dashboard in 2024, similar to the approach taken by NHS England. It is encouraging that Public Health Scotland is also devoting resource to that. However, what is key is the macro picture and the Scottish Government's wider commitment to 10 per cent of the front-line NHS budget to be spent on mental health by 2026. In our report, the committee said that progress on that has simply been far too slow and is too difficult to track. Mental health services in Scotland are not where they should be, and we must accept that. Every GP practice should be offering mental health and wellbeing services by 2026.

Our report was frank. We believe that there is

"limited oversight, transparency and accountability in relation to the performance of adult mental health services".

Therefore, we asked the Scottish Government to explain how it plans to make progress towards its 10 per cent financial commitment and how it will improve access to preventative and primary care services.

Others mentioned the postcode lottery of services. Tim Eagle referenced access in rural parts of Scotland. Willie Coffey talked about the specific needs of ethnic minorities. I also refer to the LGBT community, who face their own mental health issues. The issues that people in Scotland face are quite varied, depending on where they live and their needs. It is the Government's job to respond to that.

The committee rightly wanted to pay tribute to the vital role that the third sector plays in supporting people with their mental health—organisations such as SAMH, Change Mental Health, VOX, the Mental Health Foundation and many others—including one called Your Voice in Greenock, in my area. However, those services should be complementary to—not replacements for—statutory health services.

The nature of third sector funding is fragile and often unpredictable. We recognise that the Scottish Government does not work in multiyear funding settlements, but the committee highlights the need for certainty for such third sector services, as Tess White highlighted when she raised the plight of the men's shed network. The Government needs that funding reassurance to ensure that the vital work of the third sector can go on.

I would like to end—my voice has made it, thankfully—by thanking the Auditor General for his work, the Public Audit Committee and all the members who participated in the debate for their stark comments and contributions. It is absolutely

clear that so much more work is to be done. Any progress will be welcome, but far too many people remain in need of help and support, and none of us should be comfortable with that. The report should be a wake-up call. I hope that it is.

Urgent Question

17:15

Creative Scotland Funding (Rein Film Project)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Creative Scotland was aware that the project, Rein, which received £76,196 of funding from the organisation, had scenes that were of a sexually explicit nature before awarding it funding.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): As is right, judgments on individual applications to Creative Scotland are for that organisation, which is entirely at arm's length from ministers. However, it is imperative that Creative Scotland can command the confidence of this Parliament, not least its Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. That is why I called the chair and the chief executive in today, to make clear my expectation that they should make themselves available to the committee to fully and transparently answer any concerns that are put to them. They have given me the assurance that they will make that offer to the committee. They have also sought to assure me that new processes have been put in place to introduce safeguards to ensure that the recent issues are not repeated.

Meghan Gallacher: Creative Scotland knew back in March 2023 from Rein's application that its project would include

"a sex scene with genital contact"

involving three members of its cast. In his letter of 16 April to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, the chief executive, Iain Munro, stated:

"as became clear in March 2024 when the project team developed new content for their website and publicised that as part of a call-out for participants, one new and significant difference emerged which took the project into unacceptable territory. That was the intention to include real sex, as opposed to performance depicting simulated sex, in the work."

A freedom of information response that was released yesterday shows that that was completely untrue and that Rein was clear in its application in 2023 about what its theatre performance would contain. Can the culture secretary confirm unequivocally that he knew only yesterday that Creative Scotland lied to Parliament?

Angus Robertson: I can confirm that I saw the details of the material that was released following an FOI request only yesterday and that I had

concerns about it. That is why I immediately asked the chairman and the chief executive of Creative Scotland to meet me this afternoon in the Scottish Parliament, which they did. I asked them to meet me because I knew that there was interest in the matter across the chamber. I have spoken to colleagues in all the political parties this afternoon to let them know that I have asked the chairman and the chief executive to come to answer detailed questions that can be put to them in the committee. No doubt Meghan Gallacher will do exactly that.

Meghan Gallacher: I am still concerned about the nature of the way in which the details have emerged. However, the truth has now been exposed, and tens of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money has potentially been lost. Given that the chief executive, Iain Munro, appears to have deliberately misled Parliament, MSPs and, of course, the boss of the Scottish National Party quango, does the cabinet secretary agree that his position is now untenable? If he agrees with me, why has he not sacked him already?

Angus Robertson: On a matter of employment law, the position of chief executive at Creative Scotland is a matter for the board. I am sure that the member knows that.

In the interim, I make the point that, where serious questions are to be asked, they should receive serious answers. That is why I pressed on both the chairman and the chief executive of Creative Scotland that they should fully avail themselves of the opportunity to speak to members of the committee, including Meghan Gallacher, so that they can be satisfied about the circumstances—which she clearly still has major concerns about—but, more than that, about what systems are in place now to ensure that no such project gets funding in the future.

Meghan Gallacher: I still do not believe that that answers the question. Does the cabinet secretary have faith in Creative Scotland? Does he have faith in the chief executive, Iain Munro—yes or no?

Angus Robertson: I have been given assurances today that the chief executive has the full support of the board of Creative Scotland. As a cabinet secretary who understands that it is not for the cabinet secretary to make such determinations for arm's-length organisations, I think that there is still agreement across parties on that point—I hope that there is.

In these circumstances, where there are still questions to be answered, I am very keen that all members of Parliament, including Meghan Gallacher, are able to ask them, and I expect that the chairman and the chief executive will avail

themselves of any opportunity to brief members of the committee.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The apparent disparity between the recently obtained documents regarding the initial assessment of the funding application and the evidence that was later provided to the committee by Creative Scotland is deeply concerning, as is the apparent lack of transparency that there has been since this situation initially came to light. Given those concerns, what engagement has the cabinet secretary had with Creative Scotland with a view to fully understanding how the situation was allowed to transpire? What steps can be taken to restore trust in the organisation's internal operations?

Angus Robertson: Having the concerns that I did, I acted immediately and invited the chairman and the chief executive of Creative Scotland to come to my office within a day to explain the circumstances and what course of action is being undertaken to ensure that such an example cannot happen again.

More than that, I want to give the members of Parliament who have the responsibility of serving on the committee that has oversight for culture the ability to ask any questions that they wish of Creative Scotland. I have asked Creative Scotland to make that offer, I expect that it will and I expect that members from across the chamber will be able to ask any questions that they see fit and relevant.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Libraries are closing, kids cannot get music lessons and festival funding is being cut. At the same time, Creative Scotland awarded tens of thousands of pounds of public funds for an extreme sex project. I demanded that the original application be published, because we needed full transparency. Now it appears that, despite Creative Scotland's claims, explicit content was explicit in the application. The project should never have been awarded public funding in the first place.

In the information that was released yesterday, it appears that, as early as September 2022, within a month of funding being awarded, there were concerns within the agency about the project. Given what we know now, can the cabinet secretary explain how Creative Scotland can still maintain that the nature of the project had changed? Has he had an explanation from Creative Scotland about why warnings from within the organisation were ignored? Does he agree that the lack of transparency on this issue has been unacceptable?

Angus Robertson: First, it is for Creative Scotland to explain the decisions of Creative Scotland. I would have thought that that would be

obvious to political parties that recognise the independent nature of arm's-length organisations. I am not here to undermine something that, more than being a convention, is absolutely at the heart of how Government is supposed to operate.

Does that mean that I have not had concerns? No, it does not. I have had very serious concerns. Neil Bibby knows that, because I have spoken to him about it only today.

What I think is really important, in light of the assurances that I have been given, is that they are given to members right across the chamber. That includes Mr Bibby, who is a member of the committee. I have asked that Creative Scotland come before the committee. Mr Bibby will be able to ask any questions that he sees fit, and he will be able to take the consequences from the answers that he hears from Creative Scotland.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Can the cabinet secretary confirm what substantive steps the Government will take to rebuild public trust by ensuring full transparency and good governance across all organisations that are receiving Government funding, or will the Government just risk waiting for the media to uncover further scandals?

Angus Robertson: I have been given very clear undertakings about the changes that have taken place in Creative Scotland. This is the first example of its kind for a project that has been funded in the way that it has been funded. Creative Scotland agrees with the Government that it is an unacceptable situation, and it has already taken steps to change its processes. I expect the committee to be updated on those steps, and I assure members of Parliament who are not on the committee that the necessary changes in oversight and safeguards, the need for which the member rightly raises, will be shared with all members around the chamber.

I am sure that Creative Scotland has been listening very closely—although some people's attention has been elsewhere at this particular time—to both the questions that have been posed and the answers that I have given.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the urgent question.

Business Motions

17:24

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-13318, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 28 May 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 29 May 2024
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care
followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.10 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 30 May 2024
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice
followed by Scottish Government Debate: A Vision for Health and Social Care in Scotland
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 Tuesday 4 June 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Financial Resolution: Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 4.15 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 5 June 2024
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.10 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 6 June 2024
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Bankruptcy and Diligence (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 (b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 27 May 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]
Motion agreed to.
The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-13319, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 2 extension for a bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be extended to 31 May 2024.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:25

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-13320 and S6M-13321, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-13326, on substitution on committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Transport Partnerships (Transfer of Functions) (Scotland) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:26

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-13291, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on adult mental health, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee's 1st Report, 2024 (Session 6), Adult mental health (SP Paper 532).

The Presiding Officer: Unless any member objects, I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions. The final question is, that motions S6M-13320 and S6M-13321, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-13326, on substitution on committees, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Transport Partnerships (Transfer of Functions) (Scotland) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time and we will now move on to members' business, which is in the name of Alexander Burnett.

17:27

Members' business will be published tomorrow, Thursday 23 May, as soon as the text is available.

National Lyme Disease Awareness Month

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12082, in the name of Alexander Burnett, on national Lyme disease awareness month.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that May 2024 marks Lyme Disease Awareness Month, which aims to raise awareness of the disease in order to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment; understands that Lyme disease is a bacterial infection that can be spread to humans by infected ticks; recognises that cases of Lyme disease have been reported across Scotland, but that diagnosis and treatment of the disease can be difficult and complex due to varying symptoms, including a "bullseye" bite, rash, fatigue and flu-like symptoms; notes the importance of early diagnosis and access to antibiotic treatment, as in some cases Lyme disease can have long-term symptoms impacting someone's health, including memory problems, joint and nerve pain and heart problems, and further notes the view that there is still much more progress to be made in educating medical professionals across Scotland to help improve detection of the disease, as well as spreading public health information on how to prevent and treat Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses.

17:28

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank members for their support in bringing my motion recognising Lyme disease awareness month to the chamber for debate. Lyme disease is a bacterial infection that is transmitted to humans through the bite of an infected tick. Since being elected in 2016, I have been involved in the campaign, meeting local and national groups, including Tick-borne Illness Campaign Scotland, Lyme Disease UK and the Lyme Resource Centre, as well as experts in the field such as Professor John Lambert and, of course, the many patients whom the disease affects.

In preparation for the debate, as in previous years, I wrote to numerous organisations, asking what they have been doing to raise awareness. I am delighted to report on the improved distribution of information to staff and the wider public, and the following organisations should be applauded for their efforts: Ramblers Scotland, Public Health Scotland, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority, Forestry and Land Scotland and Scottish Forestry. I will also mention the Woodland Trust, which is working with the University of Glasgow on an initiative to monitor and test ticks for Lyme disease at Moncreiffe Hill in Perthshire. I commend the Lyme Resource Centre, which is running the "Light up for Lyme" campaign this month, with sites such as Edinburgh castle, the

Kelpies and Marischal College in Aberdeen lit up in green. It has also implemented signage and QR codes to report tick sightings and bites.

I give credit where it is due for the increase in distribution of materials to general practitioners, pharmacies and public centres, and for the Government's public relations activity to spread information. However, although there has been progress, it would appear that that is now under threat, as I understand that funding for the Scottish Government-led Lyme disease awareness-raising group has been reduced.

I have a number of questions, which I hope the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport will answer in her response today. First, I ask the minister to confirm how much was spent last year and what the Government proposes to spend this year on awareness campaigns. Secondly, what analysis is the Scottish Government carrying out on the effectiveness of those campaigns and the justification for any reduction? Funding has an impact on research. The James Hutton Institute worked on the landscape and climate impacts on ticks that carry Lyme disease, but that research was discontinued in 2019 due to Scottish Government cuts. The Hutton has faced cuts of more than 60 per cent in real terms over the past decade. Thirdly, I ask the minister to confirm that the Scottish Government will commit to funding a research programme on tick control.

I now move on to patients themselves. We might never know the number of people in Scotland who are suffering with Lyme disease. Diagnosis is difficult, and we have spoken here before about the bull's-eye rash, fatigue and the fever-like symptoms. Blood testing plays a vital role, but there is only one testing centre, which is based in the Highlands. The number of laboratory reports almost doubled in 2021 to more than 500, but the Scottish Government has no plans to set up regional blood testing centres to reduce pressure on that single resource. Similarly, more medical professionals need training in recognising Lyme disease, because early treatment is vital in preventing long-term debilitating effects such as joint pain and swelling, nerve problems, heart issues and chronic fatigue syndrome.

I take this opportunity to note that there will be a virtual film screening of "The Red Ring"—a journey into the heart of Lyme disease—by filmmaker Joonas Berghäll, which documents his experience of the disease and features discussions with other patients, researchers and doctors.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Does my colleague agree that one of the big problems with Lyme disease is the perception that it is a disease in the north of Scotland, found among the heather in the Highlands? Many GPs and people

down this end of the country do not understand that Lyme disease goes across the whole of Scotland.

Alexander Burnett: Absolutely. Lyme disease can be found all over Scotland. One of the problems involves people from urban areas visiting rural areas for enjoyment—which we all want to encourage—getting bitten and returning to an urban area, where their GP might not recognise the symptoms of Lyme disease as easily as a GP in a rural setting would.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Does my colleague recognise that ticks are now far more common? Just this afternoon, my daughter came home from nursery with a tick under her eye. That is the second tick that she has had in a matter of weeks. In my whole life, I have never had a tick, and it seems to be far more common now. We need to recognise that this is a growing issue, and it needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Alexander Burnett: I absolutely agree with that. It is becoming far more common. The change in weather patterns and the fact that some of the habitat is in urban areas, with grass not being cut, are encouraging ticks in places where we would not previously have seen them.

My greatest knowledge of the effects of the disease came through patients Janey and Lorraine, who lodged a petition back in 2017 to improve treatment for patients with Lyme disease and associated tick-borne diseases. Their petition was closed in 2021 due to some progress being made to improve resources and awareness, and a promise was made that the petitioners could meet the then Minister for Public Health and Sport. However, as I and my colleagues will highlight today, the work to improve testing and treatment of Lyme disease is not over. Worse, the petitioners have not had their meeting, as promised. They feel forgotten about, so I ask the minister to commit to rectifying that.

Yesterday, I met Janey, who has made huge progress over the past two years, having undergone a drug protocol, set by Professor Lambert, that has changed her life. However, although that treatment is also helping many other patients, it is disappointing to hear that the Scottish Government remains ignorant of that progress and appears to have no wish to engage with those medical developments. Disappointingly, according to one of the petitioners, the Scottish Government's own advisor, Professor Tom Evans, has refused to acknowledge persistent infection and the potential impact of *Borrelia* bacteria on the immune system. If such attitudes persist, how are we to start developing a vaccine?

At this point, I would like to recognise another key player: the National Trust for Scotland, which has been doing excellent work at its sites in educating staff and is proactive in engaging with the public. In particular, it is supportive of the development of the VLA15 vaccine—the only active vaccine against Lyme disease in clinical development—which is in phase 3 clinical testing in America. In 2022, the Scottish Government said that that

“is an exciting development”

and that

“we will continue to support vaccine development wherever possible”.

Can the minister confirm whether she is still excited, and what has she been doing to support development of that vaccine since that letter two years ago?

Other countries, such as America, are moving ahead in their understanding of and research on Lyme disease, helped by Finland, Germany, Sweden, Poland and the Netherlands, among others, but the Scottish National Party Government not only ignores evidence but shows no interest in learning, and it is reducing funding for those who would raise awareness and carry out vital research. Scotland's enlightenment is now under a shadow, and progress will not be made unless the Government is open minded.

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

17:36

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Alexander Burnett for securing this important members' business debate.

Lyme disease awareness month is crucial for spreading knowledge about the dangers that are posed by ticks and about the potentially serious health risks of the disease. As someone who has personally dealt with the nuisance of ticks on my dogs, I can say that those little critters are not to be underestimated. The key to keeping ourselves and our families safe is awareness and knowledge. By getting to know our adversaries, we can mitigate the risks that they pose.

As we have heard, ticks are tiny arachnids that feed on the blood of mammals, birds and, sometimes, reptiles and amphibians. They might be small, but they can have a massive impact. Ticks are found in grasslands, moors and forests—in essence, in any area where there is dense vegetation and an abundance of wildlife. They are carriers of various diseases, most notably Lyme disease. Lyme disease is caused by bacteria, which ticks can transmit through their bite. If it is left untreated, Lyme disease can lead

to serious health problems, including chronic joint inflammation—known as Lyme arthritis—and neurological symptoms. It is not just humans who are at risk; our furry companions can suffer, too.

The risk of contracting the bacteria is very low if the tick is removed promptly, using the correct technique. Current research has shown that about 10 per cent of ticks in Scotland are carriers of Lyme disease, so not all ticks are carriers. However, in Scotland, the risk is particularly high. About 1,000 cases of Lyme disease are reported annually, but the true number is likely to be much higher, given underreporting and misdiagnosis. Scotland's dense woodland and rich biodiversity create a perfect habitat for ticks, which increases the likelihood of tick bites during outdoor activities.

I will share a story about my personal battle with ticks. My dog, who is a lively golden retriever called Buster—members might know him better as a former Holyrood dog of the year—loves nothing more than running around, playing in the woods and rolling about in long grass. Unfortunately, that means that he is a prime target for ticks.

I remember the first time that I found a tick on him. Buster loves to come camping with me and the scouts, and he often spends entire days running in the fields, darting in and out of the bushes and swimming in the river. Late one evening, I noticed something unusual. As I was giving him a thorough brush, my hand brushed against a tiny hard lump near his ear. On closer inspection, I realised that it was a tick, embedded snugly in his skin.

Removing a tick is no simple task—it requires patience and the right tools. As we all know thanks to Lyme disease awareness month, we have to be very careful not to leave the head behind, as they cause infections. I fetched my trusted tick remover—a handy little gadget that I carry everywhere with us; I recommend that every pet owner has one—and, with a bit of manoeuvring, I managed to extract the tick in one piece. However, it was no mean feat. I do not know whether any members have tried wrestling inside a tent with a stubborn seven-stone retriever, but my advice is: don't.

I have now found a tick-control collar that seems to work perfectly for him, so it is now very rare that he has any ticks, but on the odd occasions that he does, I cannot help but worry about the potential for Lyme disease. That concern extends beyond Buster—it is a risk for all those who enjoy Scotland's beautiful outdoors.

It is clear that education and awareness are our best tools in combating the dangers of ticks and Lyme disease. It is important to spread that knowledge, especially to those who might be more vulnerable, such as children and the elderly, who

are more likely to spend time in tick-prone areas without realising the risks.

Let us use this month to educate ourselves and others about the risks that are associated with ticks—let us share information, check our pets and stay vigilant. It is important that information is passed on in a practical and positive way that ensures that it is easily understood, to allow people to educate and protect themselves and to make informed choices. By doing that, we can reduce the incidence of Lyme disease and ensure that our outdoor adventures remain safe and enjoyable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Torrance—I can assure you that tick removal on a springer spaniel is no easier than it is on a retriever.

17:40

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to speak this evening, and I congratulate my colleague Alexander Burnett on securing this members' business debate.

As we have heard, Lyme disease is a bacterial infection that can be spread to humans by infected ticks. Unfortunately, more and more cases of Lyme disease are being reported across Scotland. As we know, diagnosis and treatment of the disease can be difficult and complex due to the varying symptoms. Those include fatigue and flu-like symptoms, as well as the telltale bull's-eye rash. Lyme disease is becoming much more prevalent across parts of Scotland, as we have heard, and I have, in the past, supported awareness of the disease.

I was recently reminded of that when I attended the Lyme disease awareness event in the Parliament, at which I had the privilege to meet Pauline Bowie, a school teacher, from the Lyme Resource Centre. Pauline was bitten while she was a university student back in the late 1980s, but it took decades for her Lyme disease to be diagnosed. She experienced extreme pain and discomfort, as well as other symptoms, before it was diagnosed.

One of the biggest issues that we still face in Scotland is that diagnosis is still not being processed properly. We in the Parliament need to commit to playing our part, but we also need to ensure that the Government plays its part to ensure that detection and diagnosis are seen as priorities, as that has sometimes been a problem in the past.

The Lyme Resource Centre's registered office is in Kinghorn, in my Mid Scotland and Fife region. It operates virtually, so the charity's excellent services are accessible easily online. The charity

is run by a number of trustees, volunteers and clinical advisers, who are there to support individuals and who give their time freely and voluntarily to help in that regard. I whole-heartedly commend their tireless work and the work that Pauline and her colleagues are doing, because it reinforces our commitment to do all that we can to raise awareness of the disease.

One aspect of tick growth is the lack of bracken control. We have already heard and acknowledged that the Scottish Government has not authorised the use of Asulox for that purpose, which has created, and continues to create, some difficulties. Among others, NFU Scotland has talked highly of that product, and it is really disappointed that the Government has banned the use of Asulox, because the NFU sees it as an opportunity to deal positively with what we recognise is happening on the hillside. Without that, it is possible that there will be major issues for farmers and crofters, and for health, in many communities in Scotland. It is vital that we assess that decision and look at the possibilities. I hope that the minister will, in summing up, comment on what is being done and what we can achieve.

We are absolutely aware of where we are with Lyme disease. As we have heard, it is spreading not just in Scotland but in other parts of the world, where other countries are trying to manage detection more effectively. I look forward to hearing from the minister what will take place in Scotland, because it is important that we check the growth of the tick population.

As I said, I very much hope that the minister can commit to evaluating and elaborating on what will take place, because it is what happens now that is important. We know what has happened in the past, but we need to ensure that the disease is managed effectively in the future. At present, that seems not to be the case, as Alexander Burnett discussed. We also need to talk about funding issues, which need to be managed to ensure that the funding matches what we want to take forward. How we deal with those issues will be paramount, and I look forward to hearing from the minister on that.

17:45

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this evening's debate. My compliments to Alexander Burnett for securing time for this debate in what is a very important month—a month that this Parliament has noted significantly in the past. I know that Alexander Burnett's interest in Lyme disease goes back to 2016 and the discussion about the petition, which is now, unfortunately, closed. However, I echo the point about the importance of the Parliament and the Scottish Government honouring offers of

representations that were made to the petitioners, particularly with regard to a meeting that has not yet taken place.

It is important that those who come to Parliament and open up about their lived experience and bring proposals, ideas, campaigning and knowledge—in this case, about the risk to the public of ticks—are honoured and respected in return with regard to the offers that are made to them. I hope that that will happen, because it would be disappointing for anyone to have to go back round in a circle by lodging a petition to get something that has already been promised. That is perhaps a negative note, but I hope that it will be turned into a much more positive one in the minister's closing statement.

I will castigate Mr Burnett slightly. On the geographic location of ticks, the reality is that they pose a danger across the whole of Scotland, including in the south of Scotland, where we have considerable rural areas and forests. There is a genuine risk of ticks attaching to pets and subsequently moving on to individuals in the home—unfortunately, frequently to children, probably because they have fairly soft and perhaps tastier skin than some of us adults have. From the challenging statistics, it would appear that the number of cases of Lyme disease in Scotland could be five times higher than the 850 cases a year in the Highlands; it could be closer to 2,500 cases across the whole of Scotland, some of which are going undiagnosed.

Having championed the member who brought this debate, it would be unfair of me not to also mention you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and your considerable contribution in the debate last year. Workers are underrepresented in this debate, given the risk that they take by working in the countryside, particularly in forests in the south of Scotland. It is well known that the combination of wooded areas and the inclement and slightly damp weather that has visited us today is almost the perfect recipe for an explosion of ticks and, consequently, the explosion of risk to workers in forested and wooded areas.

Considerable steps have been taken by those who work in forestry to alter behaviour, because reducing ticks in open countryside has been challenging and it is almost doubly challenging in wooded and forested areas, particularly where there is a large deer population. As one member has said in the past, deer are absolute tick magnets.

Therefore, those who work in forests and woods are required to have knowledge of ticks and to change their behaviour in order to measure and understand their risk of exposure. Those who take to the countryside for enjoyment might roll up their socks, which, although it is not the greatest

protection, is a way of reducing exposure. However, the requirement to wear safety equipment adds to the challenge that forestry workers have in protecting themselves. Therefore, it is also about self-care, which speaks very strongly to David Torrance's comment about the ability to use this month for the purposes of education about checking for ticks and having a process for doing that: look for a rash surrounding a bite; consider that a fever might not be a common cold; consider that a headache, dizziness and, sometimes, an irregular heartbeat that someone is suffering could be more than a passing symptom to be ignored and that, instead, they should go to the GP.

That speaks to the other request in the opening comments, which is that we need to ensure that our medical profession in its widest scope across the whole of Scotland understand the symptoms to look for and the approach that should be taken. As we know from the lived experience of so many people who have been to the Parliament, if Lyme disease takes a hold on a person, it is incredibly difficult to control; however, if caught early enough, the disease is much easier to deal with.

On that point, I thank you for your patience, Deputy Presiding Officer.

17:50

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank Alexander Burnett for leading the debate. Lyme disease is an issue close to my heart. Colleagues may remember that I led a debate on the subject last year.

I recently had the pleasure of hosting a reception with the Lyme Resource Centre, to kick off national Lyme disease awareness month. I thank members who gave a shout-out to that event, at which we heard from campaigners who had been absolutely debilitated by Lyme disease—sometimes after decades of misdiagnosis. In contrast, I have heard recently about several cases that have been caught early and in which antibiotics have been administered quickly.

My constituent, Heather McKay from Doune, told me about her eight-year-old son, Arran. He had a bite mark behind his ear and a rash that spread across his face. It was not in the shape of a bull's-eye, and the GP did not think that it was Lyme disease. Arran then developed a fever, and Heather became convinced that that had something to do with the bite. Within a few days, Arran became extremely unwell and was admitted to hospital, where he was treated for Lyme disease. As members can imagine, that was an extremely stressful time for the family. Thankfully, Arran is fully recovered, and I am glad to say that

his grandparents, Brian and Pauline, are with us in the chamber today.

Arran's was not a textbook case. The GP had focused on looking for a bull's-eye rash. Although that is a good sign to look for, there does not need to be a rash. There may be no rash; neither does any rash need to be in the shape of a bull's-eye. In one in three cases, there is no rash at all. We need to ensure that there is an understanding that many cases do not present in that way.

Martin Whitfield: Evelyn Tweed is right that none of those symptoms may appear. Having had the education, it is important to listen to your body—in the case that she describes, there was the wonderful example of the mum not taking the professional advice. It is about listening. If people think that there is a problem, they should persist until they get the answer.

Evelyn Tweed: I completely agree with what Martin Whitfield has said. People have to look at it in the round and think about it for themselves.

Catching the symptoms of Lyme disease early is an excellent outcome, but preventing it in the first place is even better. Members have already talked about some of that. Tucking trousers into socks sounds really easy, but it works. Using insect repellent on skin and clothes can stop bites.

There is still some way to go. The Lyme Resource Centre has recently shared the results of a survey that found that 42 per cent of people who were diagnosed with Lyme disease in Scotland had not been at all aware of that disease. Many people see ticks as a risk only when venturing out into the hills in summertime. However, one in five who answered the survey was bitten in their own garden.

I agree with earlier comments on prevalence. There is some evidence that milder and wetter winters are extending the lifespan of ticks. Warmer weather is also increasing the time that people spend outdoors. Those factors are likely to increase the risk of transmission. I am glad that further research into that is part of the Scottish Government's climate change national adaptation plan. The minister committed to an awareness campaign, and I was pleased to see the publication of materials recently. I call on the Government to detail how it can build on that and ensure that the public know about the changing risk.

Given stories such as Arran's, I hope that we are becoming more aware of Lyme disease and are acting more quickly to combat it. I am extremely grateful to the 25 MSPs who attended my event earlier this month and signed the Lyme Resource Centre pledge. Together, we can work cross-party to ensure that the issue is firmly on the agenda.

17:55

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Many thanks to my colleague Alexander Burnett for bringing this debate to the chamber and for his tireless efforts on raising awareness of the issue. I associate myself with Evelyn Tweed's remarks. She is right. There is no science with Lyme disease, so it is not easy and obvious to spot when there is a problem. That is why it is so important that we here are all raising awareness of the issue.

I can remember waking one morning many years ago to find the all-too-common bull's eye on my leg, and I can remember thinking to myself, "Oh not again," because ticks are, sadly, an all-too-common occurrence in my line of work—I have lived and worked in the countryside for a long time. I must have missed that one. I suspect that the tick had long since gone for a nice rest after feeding on me for quite a while.

The problem was that I was in London on a family holiday at the time. I went to an out-of-hours GP surgery to see whether I could get treatment before I got home. The doctor I saw was confused and seemingly did not know much about the possibilities of Lyme disease—I imagine that London was not a hotbed of tick activity at the time. As we were discussing the matter, an Australian doctor happened to walk past. She took one glance at my leg as the other doctor examined it, smiled and said, "Oh, you've got the Lymes then!" Within seconds, she had advised on the treatment, I had my prescription, and I was away. Thankfully, I did not come to any harm. I think that that was because of the doctor's actions. Oddly enough, in Australia, Lyme disease is not so much of a problem but, with more than 70 species of tick there, other diseases are, and doctors there are very aware of the problem.

That is where we need to be in Scotland. As deer numbers increase, sheep leave the hills. We used to have tick mops on the hills, but we do not really have those any more. More woodland is being planted and, as climate change persists, we are seeing large rises in tick numbers and more people are becoming infected. Getting the message out about Lyme disease, spotting the symptoms and treatment are vital. I am glad to see that more primary care doctors are being informed about that now.

It is great to see the work of projects such as TickSolve, which is a fantastic four-year project involving the University of Glasgow. It will investigate the ecological conditions that enable tick-borne infections to spread, identify areas of the United Kingdom in which the health risks are likely to be highest, and put forward possible solutions. TickSolve will determine whether climate change and woodland expansion are likely

to increase tick-borne infections such as Lyme disease in the UK. The project will finish next year. Perhaps my colleague Alexander Burnett will hold another debate then to discuss the report.

As others have mentioned, the tick is just the host; it is the bacteria that are the problem. Once burgdorferi bacteria have made their way inside the human body, they hide in plain sight. They enter by way of the tick's salivary secretions and then quickly migrate into the skin. From there, they travel through the bloodstream to other fixed tissues, such as joints, the heart and the brain. That is not a very pleasant thought, is it?

As my colleague Alexander Burnett mentioned, testing and treatment are key. I will finish on testing. For something that can cause such long-term issues, the testing is not all that good. Current tests can be wildly inaccurate even in positive patients; false positive and negative results are common and tests require a build-up of the antibodies before they will even detect infection. It is great to hear of potential new tests being worked on in America, with Tufts University, EpitogenX and UCF College of Medicine all working on promising new testing. However, I urge people in Scotland to work on that too.

Persistent symptoms of Lyme disease can be debilitating and, with ticks increasing, the disease could become far too common. Reliable, quick-to-use tests could allow quick diagnosis, treatment and cure. That would save the national health service money in the long term and, most important, help people who contract the disease. I hope that our research institutes have access to the funding that is needed to look into that. I call on the Scottish Government to check that they do.

17:59

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I join other members in thanking Alexander Burnett for bringing this debate to the chamber during Lyme disease awareness month. I am pleased to have the opportunity to close the debate, although public health is no longer my portfolio. However, given the area that I live in and represent, Lyme disease is a topic of keen interest for me.

I am keen to highlight the importance of raising awareness of Lyme disease because, as others have mentioned, it is crucial that people are aware of it so that they can access early intervention and treatment, should they think that they have it. The debate is timely, not only because it coincides with Lyme disease awareness month but because we have seen a rise in cases in Scotland in recent years.

As we approach the summer months, when more people are likely to be out enjoying the

outdoors, it is important to highlight that, although ticks are commonly found in woodlands and grassy areas, as others have said, they can also be found in parks and gardens throughout Scotland.

I am the minister for sport and I am passionate about physical activity, and we want people to get out and enjoy all that Scotland has to offer in our beautiful outdoor spaces. However, we must provide information on how to avoid being bitten, such as by tucking trousers into socks—as glamorous as it looks, it is an effective measure. We also need to know how to safely remove an attached tick. I am sure that people can buy many gadgets online, all of which are really good at getting ticks out safely.

It is key that we are aware of signs and symptoms. We know that prevention is the best defence against Lyme disease. My colleague Jenni Minto, Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, closed a similar debate on Lyme disease last year, and I am very pleased to hear of the further efforts that have been made to raise awareness of the disease this year.

I pass on my thanks to Evelyn Tweed and the Lyme Resource Centre, who hosted and sponsored the “Light up for Lyme” event in Parliament earlier this month, which provided an insight into ticks and Lyme disease in Scotland. I attended the event, along with the public health minister and other MSPs, as well as a large number of guests from outdoor professional and educational organisations, who shared their experience and expertise on Lyme disease. Government officials will be meeting the organisation again soon to build on the work that we already do with it through the awareness-raising group.

A number of people have mentioned dogs. Members will know that my dog, Cooper, did not win Holyrood dog of the year—which was a tragedy and a travesty—but he lives on the shores of Loch Broom in the Highlands, which is tick heaven. He gets preventative medicine every month to prevent ticks from lodging into him. For people who live in an area of high tick numbers, as I do, it is very worth while considering doing that. We have also often wondered whether humans could do something similar, but the science is not quite there yet.

The Brennan laboratory, which is based in the University of Glasgow's centre for virus research, is currently researching how clinically relevant pathogens are transmitted by ticks. It aims to better understand how the viruses manipulate the different cellular environments in a tick or a mammal to sustain virus replication and cause disease, including Lyme disease. The Brennan laboratory is partnering with the Conservation

Volunteers in Scotland and the Lyme Resource Centre to develop a tick map, which people can use to report tick sightings and bites in Scotland. That data will be shared with academic partners to use for future research funding and evidence.

Risks to health from tick vector-borne disease have been highlighted, as others have said, in the current UK-wide climate change risk assessment. The Scottish Government is required to respond to that and inputted to the final statutory Scottish climate change adaptation programme in March 2024. As others have said, it is clear that climate change is having an impact on the risk of vector-borne disease. The University of Glasgow leads the mosquito Scotland project, which looks at precisely that issue. There is a risk of mosquitoes reaching Scotland, so there is also a risk of vector-borne disease from them, but the university is also looking at broader issues.

The Scottish Government is committed to raising awareness of Lyme disease. That is why I am delighted that social media activity will run throughout this month through stakeholder and partner engagement. Awareness-raising toolkits are being distributed to stakeholders such as NHS 24, Public Health Scotland and VisitScotland, which use them across their networks and digital channels, as well as in editorial copy for newsletters, websites and emails. That activity will be further supported by social media across Government-owned platforms. There will be another burst of activity in June to focus on childcare settings, as a reminder to families and staff to be tick aware over the warmer months when they are enjoying being outdoors, perhaps responding to exactly the situation that Finlay Carson raised.

Increasing awareness of Lyme disease, including the symptoms, how it spreads and risk factors, is key to the prevention of Lyme disease in Scotland. Public communications are required not only to raise awareness but to acknowledge that ticks are not limited to the countryside or farms; they can be found in cities as well, as many have said.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for taking an intervention, and I apologise for pushing all the wrong buttons, Presiding Officer.

I have a constituent, Emily Gilmore, who contracted Lyme disease along with her son. She was persistent, in the way that we heard earlier. She did not get any help from the NHS and had to go down the private route—she spent thousands of pounds on that—and there now seems to be a vendetta by the NHS against her and her husband, Nick. Will the minister look at that case for me to see whether there is any help that the

Government can give to assist with clearing the parents' names?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are not a stranger to pushing the wrong buttons, Mr Lumsden, I would suggest. Minister, I can give you the time back for the intervention.

Maree Todd: We are always concerned to hear about people who are having difficulty accessing the care and help that they require from the NHS. As the member knows, we regularly meet any constituents who have not had the standard of care that we would hope for. Certainly, if the member writes to the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, I am sure that she will engage with him on the issues that he raises.

Early recognition and effective treatment are essential to preventing long-term health consequences of Lyme disease. That is why we have asked officials to work with clinicians and experts to look at how we could standardise treatment pathways across Scotland, with a particular focus on patients with complex or post-infection Lyme disease.

We are making progress in Scotland on testing and diagnosis. The Scottish Lyme disease and tick-borne infections lab at Raigmore hospital in Inverness, which I visited many years ago, continues to carry out research and development into new tests for tick-borne diseases, which will greatly improve our understanding of this complex infection. I am sure that it would accommodate a visit from members with a keen interest in the issues. It really is worth learning more about how that laboratory works.

We continue to work closely with stakeholders and clinicians through the health professionals education sub-group. The group is examining the current resources that are being used by GPs and is considering options for additional learning and development.

Finally, I feel that I must raise the issue of tick-borne encephalitis. There has been identification of a probable case of tick-borne encephalitis—a potentially serious infection—in Scotland last year, so clinical surveillance for that has been increased. It is important to note, though, that one probable case is not evidence of a significant change to the risk to human health in Scotland from TBE. Last year, the human animal infections and risk surveillance group published an updated TBE risk assessment, which states that the risk of infection to the general population in the UK remains very low.

In closing, I am happy to follow up in writing the specific questions that Alexander Burnett put to me. He will get a response from the public health minister. I reiterate that the risk of Lyme disease should not put people off spending time outdoors.

There are a few simple steps that people can take to protect themselves: cover up bare skin; wear long trousers and tuck them into your socks; if you are in long grass, use insect repellent; and check yourself and clothing for ticks after being outside. I often joke that my family and I are like monkeys picking over each other after we have been outside, but that is a necessity in my part of the country.

If you find a tick, carefully remove it using a tick remover or fine tweezers, and speak to your GP if you develop symptoms. In the Highlands, there is a low threshold for prescribing antibiotics when people present with symptoms, because there is a high level of recognition. However, the story that Tim Eagle described shows that it is important that individuals have a knowledge that they might be facing Lyme disease, so that they can explain it to health professionals who may not know.

I thank Alexander Burnett for lodging the motion and everyone who contributed to the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate and I close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:09.

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