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Tuesday 11 June 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Bowel Cancer Screening	3
International Students (Immigration Rules)	4
CHILD POVERTY	9
<i>Motion moved—[John Swinney].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Douglas Ross].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Paul O’Kane].</i>	
The First Minister (John Swinney)	9
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	15
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	20
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	25
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	27
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	29
Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con).....	31
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP).....	34
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	36
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	38
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	41
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	43
Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	46
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)	48
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	50
Maggie Chapman	53
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	54
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con).....	57
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	61
BUSINESS MOTION	67
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	68
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	69
RENFREWSHIRE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PARTNERSHIP	76
<i>Motion debated—[Neil Bibby].</i>	
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	76
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	79
Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con).....	80
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	82
The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd).....	83

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 11 June 2024

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Dr Amy Orr-Ewing, author and theologian, and honorary lecturer at the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Amy Orr-Ewing: Before the impact of the Covid pandemic, the Scottish household survey in 2018 was the first to include a question on loneliness. The results of the survey showed that 21.3 per cent of people reported feeling lonely at some point in the previous week. The figure was higher than average for people in the age groups of 16 to 24-year-olds, 25 to 34-year-olds and the over-75s. The young and the old are lonely. We are in a cultural moment crying out for connection.

Relationships matter greatly to humanity, and our theme today is relationship. I suggest to you that for relationships—whether personal, political, corporate, familial or international—to flourish there needs to be a grounding: a basis that makes sense and that works in practice.

The French philosopher Voltaire famously said:

“We look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation”,

and perhaps one of the books that has most shaped Scotland—the Bible—might have something to say that could help us with the question of relationships. In the book of John, chapter 1, it says:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning ... In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Here are two things that matter greatly for relationships: words, or truth, and goodness. John’s gospel opens with that phrase,

“In the beginning was the Word”.

Meaning, language and truth are real in an ultimate sense. Our hunger for clarity and integrity in public life—and not for the doublespeak of Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, the propaganda of totalitarian regimes or the fake news and algorithm-driven echo chambers of our day—points us to a deep truth about ourselves as humans beings. Words matter and truth matters; we are creatures of the word.

In relationships, goodness also matters. In public life, goodness matters. The agnostic historian Tom Holland points out in his book “Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind” that many of our deeply held intuitions about what goodness is have been indelibly shaped by Jesus Christ. It is humility rather than pride and glory; it is love of neighbour, self-sacrifice, faithfulness and kindness.

John Knox said:

“When I think of those who have influenced my life the most, I think not of the great but of the good.”

Words matter and goodness matters. It is not weakness to believe that; it is strength. A coherent foundation for truth and goodness can be found in the person of Jesus Christ, who in John 1 is described as the light shining in the darkness.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Bowel Cancer Screening

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether bowel cancer screening is being carried out to detect cancer at the earliest possible stage or whether it is being determined by NHS capacity for colonoscopies and treatment. (S6T-02037)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Scotland is the only United Kingdom nation to fully adopt the United Kingdom National Screening Committee's recommendation to screen all individuals aged between 50 and 74. The UK National Screening Committee has not recommended a specific threshold at which individuals should be referred for colonoscopy, but Scotland has the lowest referral threshold in the UK.

Edward Mountain: Professor Farhat Din has made it clear to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee that she has seen bowel cancer patients who had been falsely reassured after sending off their stool samples. I accept that Scotland leads the way on the sensitivity of screening for bowel cancer, but that is not sufficient.

The minister has told me that the test cannot be made more sensitive because NHS Scotland does not have the capacity to carry out further investigations and primary colonoscopies. Can the minister quantify the estimated number of additional colonoscopies that would be required, and their cost, if the sensitivity of the test was increased by 75 per cent, as has been called for by Bowel Cancer UK?

Jenni Minto: I note the comments that were made by Professor Din in her statement and evidence.

Colonoscopy capacity in the national health service is continuously monitored and the bowel programme board will continue considering lowering the FIT—faecal immunochemical test—threshold. In the meantime, patients who are, via the Scottish bowel screening programme, referred with an urgent suspicion of cancer will continue to be prioritised for scope-based diagnostic tests, based on their level of clinical need.

Edward Mountain: That does not answer the question. Answers to freedom of information requests that I submitted to health boards across Scotland suggest that the cost of a colonoscopy is in the region of £800, or up to £2,500 if one is

forced to go private. Does the minister really believe that saving that small sum of money is an adequate excuse for not detecting bowel cancer as early as possible, thereby making it treatable and preventing the potential horrors of bowel cancer, including chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery—which I know all about—or, worse still, death?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the work that Edward Mountain has done to raise awareness of the importance of bowel cancer testing. From my experience of having a father who was diagnosed with bowel cancer, I recognise the importance of carrying out the test.

Mr Mountain and I have had a number of conversations about the matter. The advice is that we should work towards a lower test threshold. However, that threshold would subject more people to potentially unnecessary diagnostic tests, while impacting on waiting times for symptomatic patients.

I am content to continue our conversations to see whether we can move things on.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is vital that cancer is detected at the earliest possible stage to ensure the best chance of survival for patients. Our rapid diagnostic services, including the service that has been established in Dumfries and Galloway NHS, play a crucial role in that. Will the minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's assessment of the impact to date of Scotland's rapid cancer diagnostic services?

Jenni Minto: The Scottish Government has invested additional money to reduce colonoscopy waiting lists. We have also ensured that we will have mobile units available for allocation around the country, as necessary, for another year.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The latest data from Public Health Scotland shows a shocking 21 per cent gap in the uptake of bowel cancer screening between the most-deprived areas and the least-deprived areas. Does the minister accept that health inequalities are a blight on Scotland and does she also accept that this Scottish National Party Government is not doing enough to close that divisive health inequality gap?

Jenni Minto: I absolutely recognise that there are inequalities in the uptake of bowel screening. The Scottish Government has been investing to try to reduce those inequalities and ensure that more people from the diversity of people in Scotland take part in the bowel cancer screening.

International Students (Immigration Rules)

2. **Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it

has made of reports that Scottish universities' budgets have been impacted by £100 million due to a 20 per cent drop in applications from international students in the last academic year as a result of new United Kingdom Government immigration rules. (S6T-02044)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): International students play a crucial role socially, culturally and economically in Scotland, and it is important that we continue to do everything that we can to welcome them to live, study and work in Scotland.

Instead, however, UK immigration policies are attempting to turn them away, which is hurting our higher education sector and demonstrating once again that those policies simply do not address Scotland's distinct demographic and economic needs. The Scottish Government will continue to push the UK Government for a migration policy that meets Scotland's needs, and for the decisions to be made in Scotland in order for Scotland to ensure that we can support our world-class universities.

Michelle Thomson: Does the cabinet secretary agree with the recent statement by Sir Anton Muscatelli of the University of Glasgow, who said that

"By restricting student visas, the UK is endangering its world-class university sector"?

It is time to stop the senseless self-harm to our economy and to focus on our national assets. To have a discriminatory visa system that is designed to satisfy the extreme prejudice of the anti-immigration lobby is an act of colossal self-harm. Surely what we need is to encourage more undergraduate and graduate students by removing all visa impediments.

Jenny Gilruth: I completely agree with Sir Anton. Not only do international students enrich our culture and our cities, but they support our universities through their contribution to our world-leading research and they support this vital area of the economy more broadly. Sir Anton leads one of our world-class universities—I declare an interest as a graduate of the University of Glasgow—and people there can see every day the damage that is being done to our higher education sector by right-wing immigration policy at Westminster and by a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for.

The Scottish Government has recently set out, in our "Building a New Scotland" series of proposals, a Scottish connections visa that would allow graduates to work in Scotland in order to become eligible for Scottish citizenship. That is what independence can offer, unlike the status quo, which is continuing to damage our higher education sector. It could not be clearer that leaving such decisions to the UK Government,

whether it be led by Labour or the Tories, is just not in Scotland's interests.

Michelle Thomson: Not only have we witnessed a drop in the number of international students who come to study here, but, as the cabinet secretary correctly notes, Brexit has brutally removed opportunities for Scotland's universities to build international relationships. Does she share my concern that Scotland's further and higher education sectors are suffering under a refusal from Westminster—from the Tory and Labour parties alike—to acknowledge, own and address the damage of Brexit, and that the best way to address that damage is to return to membership of the European Union?

Jenny Gilruth: I absolutely agree with Michelle Thomson's points. Brexit has caused incredible damage—not just to Scotland's further and higher education sectors, but to our wider economy and society. It has meant staff losing the ability to move freely and share ideas and—of course—it has meant students losing the ability to experience new cultures. The UK Government's decision not to participate in or associate with Erasmus+ is a particularly damaging example of that. It robs our young people of the opportunities that previous generations, including mine, took for granted.

With both Labour and the Conservatives being committed to that extreme form of Brexit, which Scotland rejected, this Government will continue to make the case for Scotland to rejoin the European Union as an independent country, which would see our universities playing a full, positive and constructive role with our neighbours in Europe and ensuring that our world-class researchers remain at the forefront of international collaboration.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Dr Conlon of London Economics told the Education, Children and Young People Committee last week:

"Higher education institutions here are underfunded: they have 27 per cent less funding than institutions in England"—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 5 June 2024; c 36.]

In a submission that was received today, Robert Gordon University says:

"the under-funding of Scottish HE means ... a conscious Scottish Government policy where fee income from international students is expected to cross-subsidise universities' activities."

Conlon later said that

"Ultimately, an institution is going to fall over ... If you are happy to let an institution collapse, then it"—

"it" being funding—

"is sustainable, but it might not be ideal."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 5 June 2024; c 38.]

Is the cabinet secretary happy to let an institution collapse due to Scottish Government policy?

Jenny Gilruth: Liam Kerr will recognise that, as a result of a funding cut to this Government's budget from his party in Westminster, this Government has faced one of the most challenging financial situations since devolution.

However, despite that challenging fiscal position, the 2024-25 budget allocates nearly £2 billion to colleges and universities to support their delivery of high-quality education, training and research. We have also invested £1 billion in Scotland's university sector every year since 2012-13. This year, in addition, we have protected an increase to the research budget of 4.75 per cent in cash terms—which, I note, was welcomed by Universities Scotland in its briefing to the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I heard the cabinet secretary, but she will also be aware that Scottish Government funding to universities has fallen by £2,325 per student between 2014-15 and 2021-22. At the weekend, Sir Paul Grice said that

“over the last decade, government has just not been able to meet its part of the deal.”

Universities Scotland said that, as a result, institutions face closures. The National Union of Students and the University and College Union say that there is concern about retention of poorer students and that university job losses are looming. With that in mind, does the cabinet secretary believe that the Scottish Government is properly funding universities? If so, what does she say to those, including Sir Paul Grice, who say otherwise?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for her question and for her interest in the matter.

The Labour Party seems to have been adhering to the Conservatives' spending ideas in relation to public services, including on funding for our universities. If the member would like additionality for our university sector, I am sure that she will be having a word with her bosses in London about Labour's proposals for allocation of funding to the sector.

I am very content with the funding that this Government provides to the university sector, in the context of there being a funding cut from the UK Government. If Pam Duncan-Glancy's party will seek to reverse that funding cut, I am sure that we can have a conversation about the sustainability of Scotland's university sector, but until the Labour Party takes such a decision—I have not yet heard it do so—I do not think that we

will have an honest conversation about sustainability.

More broadly, on the member's point about funding for our universities, one really important thing that my party believes in is the policy of free tuition. I think that Pam Duncan-Glancy's party does not now support that policy. It would be helpful to hear from Scottish Labour whether it would support it. I see Pam Duncan-Glancy nodding. The last time that the Labour Party was in power in the Scottish Parliament, people such as I had to pay the graduate endowment, so we well remember the impact that its decisions on tuition fees had on people from low-income families. Just now, this Government is helping students in Scotland to avoid accruing debt of up to £27,750 each. The Labour Party should think again about its policy on free tuition.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time. There will be a momentary pause, to allow the front benches to organise.

Child Poverty

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-13566, in the name of John Swinney, on Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call John Swinney to speak to and move the motion. You have up to 15 minutes, First Minister.

14:19

The First Minister (John Swinney): When I accepted the Parliament's nomination as First Minister, I made it clear that the single greatest priority for my Government would be the eradication of child poverty. That was little more than a month ago, and much has happened since. We now have a United Kingdom general election in July, which has meant that, due to pre-election guidance, the Scottish Government is unable to set out more detail on the specific plans that we intend to take forward. However, that is an opportunity for ministers to engage the Parliament on views from across the political spectrum on how we can most effectively achieve our aim of eradicating child poverty.

I made it clear when I became First Minister that I wanted to bring people together to focus on shared priorities. I would be the first to accept that, in the context of a general election campaign with contested agendas, priorities and political choices, the environment for such a conversation is more than a little challenging.

I intend, however, to participate in the debate in the spirit in which I intend to act as First Minister, which is to set out the mission of this Government but also to listen to others and to commit to reflect on how the Government can work across Parliament to achieve our mission. The election campaign will not last forever—I suspect that I speak for all members when I say that I am grateful for that. It will be complete in just over three weeks' time, and we will then know the wider political landscape in which we are operating.

I also intend to participate in the debate on the basis that I have set out, because I recognise that there is a shared desire in this Parliament to achieve the Government's mission of eradicating child poverty. Although Parliament may be polarised at this time, surely there must be scope for us to find common ground on an issue that is so fundamental to the health, wellbeing and future of children in our society.

The offer that I made in this chamber last month, and that I made to local authorities, businesses, the third sector and communities, remains the same. Let us work together to deliver

for Scotland. Let us co-operate in good faith and try to find consensus. Let us capitalise on our shared values and goals and our shared commitment to the future of this country.

On the question of eradicating child poverty, our challenge is significant, given that we are operating in a context of acute difficulty in achieving that aim. Over the past decade, the upheaval that has been brought on by austerity, the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and the impacts of Brexit has escalated the scale of the challenge that we face.

We are a modern nation and a prosperous nation. Our economy must meet the needs of everyone in our society. We must build on our current economic performance to create new opportunities to generate economic activity and wealth, and we must ensure that the wealth of our country is used to transform the lives of all our citizens. Our definition of prosperity must place the wellbeing of current and future generations at its core, and that prosperity must belong to everyone in our society, not only to some.

Every child in Scotland deserves a fair start in life. They deserve good health, safety, education and opportunity. As a parent, the greatest priority in my personal life is to see my three remarkable children safe, healthy and happy. My aspirations will be no different to those of all parents of all families and communities across Scotland and of colleagues in this parliamentary chamber.

My Government will build on the strong foundations laid over the years of this Scottish National Party Government, which has seen a transformation in the life chances of children in Scotland. Since 2007, we have more than doubled the funded hours of early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours for all three and four-year-olds, and for two-year-olds who will benefit most from the provision of such support. We have established a new social security service, delivering 14 benefits—seven of them brand new and available only in Scotland, including the Scottish child payment. We have delivered more than 128,000 affordable homes, of which more than 90,000 are homes for social rent. That is 43 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than England and 73 per cent more than Wales. That is in addition to giving every baby in Scotland the best start in life by providing their families with a baby box, expanding free bus travel for all under-22-year-olds and passing milestone legislation to ensure that children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled under Scots law.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice reported in her statement to Parliament last week, last year this Government increased its spend benefiting children in low-income households to almost £1.4 billion. We provided nearly £430

million in Scottish child payments to families, supporting more than 329,000 children, and we increased the value of all Scottish benefits by 10.1 per cent, except for the Scottish child payment, which we increased by 25 per cent the year before. We launched the carer support payment and expanded eligibility for best start foods to reach an additional 20,000 pregnant women and young children, and we delivered innovative school-age childcare services through our early adopter projects.

In total, our investment in social security benefits and payments in 2023-24 amounted to an estimated £5.3 billion. All that has happened despite the on-going pressure on public finances, the spending cuts, the cost of living crisis and the inflationary pressures with which we have wrestled. People should make no mistake: Scotland's actions and policies are having an impact. We are making a difference.

Although the data showing the full impact of our policy interventions has not yet been captured in the latest poverty statistics, modelling estimates that this Government's policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, with relative poverty levels being 10 per cent lower than they would have been otherwise. It is therefore crystal clear that the Government's interventions are making a profound impact on the lives and wellbeing of children in our society.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I appreciate the way in which the First Minister has approached the debate. We will all be grateful to put the election to one side in order to take part. I want to ask about the number of children in temporary accommodation, which is an issue that I have raised consistently. There are now almost 10,000 children in such accommodation in Scotland. The statistic has gone in the wrong direction every single year over the past five years. Where is the Scottish Government taking action on that?

The First Minister: I know that Mr Briggs has a long history of raising that serious issue, which cannot be divorced from the challenges on the availability of housing stock in society in general. The Scottish Government has a substantial record on constructing new social housing. A moment ago, I set out the scale of the achievement on affordable homes. Comparatively speaking, we have moved at a faster pace than has happened in England and Wales, and we have delivered more projects and more accommodation on the ground.

However, I acknowledge the severity of the issue that Mr Briggs has raised. The Government's housing strategy is designed to intensify the development of affordable housing in Scotland. One of the challenges that we currently face is the availability of financial transactions,

which has been the mainstay of our approach to the affordable housing programme. That is why the Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan, has convened the housing investment task force, which is exploring other finance models to enable us to expand the housing supply. The fundamental answer to Mr Briggs's fair question is to ensure that we have adequate housing supply to meet the needs of our population.

I turn to the Government's performance. As a consequence of its policy aim of keeping 100,000 children out of relative poverty, the Scottish child payment alone is estimated to be keeping 60,000 children out of such poverty. That is a policy choice that the Government has made, at the expense of other policy options that it could have adopted. It has also been informed and enabled by the decisions that the Government has been prepared to take on tax, which have created greater availability of revenue for investment in public services and programmes than would ordinarily have been the case. At the heart of the debate is our willingness to take decisions that will be controversial and challenging—ones that people might not always like, particularly on the tax question—to enable us to take the necessary action on eradicating child poverty.

Recent analysis from the Trussell Trust found that our policies have helped to slow the pace of demand for food parcels, with Scotland being the only part of the United Kingdom not to see an increase in the number of such parcels being distributed through the trust's network last year. On that measure, the Government's activities are, again, achieving the objective of ensuring that families have at their disposal more resources that enable them to exercise more choice over their circumstances.

Although there are signs of great progress, I recognise that we still have a long way to go and that we face headwinds. We are greatly constrained by our budget settlements from Westminster, which, historically, have been challenging, as well as by the limits of our devolved powers.

For too long, decisions that are made at Westminster have undermined our ambition and the progress that we in Scotland seek to achieve. Next month's general election brings its own uncertainty and challenges, and we all have to recognise that decisions that are taken at a UK level will inevitably set the context in which we have to operate. This Government has demonstrated that we will use all the levers that are available to us to make as much progress as we can, but a United Kingdom Government that was more favourable to our objectives would help, rather than hinder, us in that regard.

Our ambition is to ensure that every child in Scotland has the means, resources and support to enable them to reach their full potential. We will ensure that the Government has the necessary focus on eradicating child poverty, because that is the surest investment in Scotland's future. That touches on some of the choices that will be relevant in the forthcoming general election campaign and decision.

From the start of the current financial year, the Government has increased all social security benefits by a further 6.7 per cent to provide more support to people on low incomes and those who need it most. In total, we are committing a record £6.3 billion to benefits expenditure, which is £1.1 billion more than the United Kingdom Government gives the Scottish Government for social security purposes. We are essentially putting the investment where it is required.

One of the exciting projects that we have taken forward has been the investment of £16 million to expand our early adopter community projects. I visited one of those projects in Fife and heard at first hand from parents about the difference that having a reliable childcare service and support makes to their family. Yesterday, I visited Pollok United to see one of the after-school clubs that is supported through our extra time programme, which is a joint initiative with the Scottish Football Association to provide before-school, after-school and holiday football clubs for children from families on low incomes. This year, we are investing an additional £4 million in the extra time programme and expanding it to 31 clubs, which will give around 30,000 children each week free access to sport and other activities that wrap around the school day.

In combination with our decision to distribute a one-off emergency fund of £1.5 million to support councils to help remove the impact of school meal debt on families, we are taking practical measures to support families at a local level. The passage of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which includes homelessness prevention duties, will go a long way to supporting what needs to be delivered to address the issues that Miles Briggs put to me.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Given that the First Minister is talking about children in poverty in school and interventions over the school holidays, can he comment on whether all local authorities in Scotland will meet their statutory duty to provide wraparound care for disabled children, many of whom are in poverty, over the forthcoming summer holidays?

The First Minister: We will take forward the issue in dialogue with local authorities. As Mr Marra will know, local authorities act independently of the Government and they have to make their own choices. Nonetheless, he raises

an important issue about the support that can be put in place and the need to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met in all circumstances.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I note that there will be material issues in the election campaign that are of significance on the question of whether, after the election, we have a UK Government that helps or hinders the work of the Scottish Government. I hope that we are in a position in which the work that—as I have set out—the Scottish Government is taking forward in its own areas of competence will be enhanced and reinforced by the actions of our United Kingdom Government. In that respect, I will be interested in issues such as whether we have to operate with the two-child limit in place, which is a significant impediment to the work that the Government is taking forward to try to lift children of poverty, as it drives poverty in our society, and whether there will be steps to introduce an essentials guarantee, which would lift a further 30,000 children in Scotland out of relative poverty.

There are important issues to wrestle with in the election campaign that will shape the way in which the Scottish Government is able to take forward its agenda. We cannot deny the impact of that agenda on our priorities in Scotland, and I have already set out to Parliament the cumulative actions that we have taken as a Government to ensure that we use our powers and responsibilities to the maximum in taking action to eradicate child poverty. However, we look to the United Kingdom Government to set a policy direction and a fiscal direction that would enable us to do more and achieve our objectives. We will, of course, engage constructively with the United Kingdom Government after the election to ensure that those issues are well understood in relation to taking forward the Scottish Government's agenda.

I close my opening remarks in this first debate that I lead as First Minister by reinforcing to Parliament the Government's commitment to the importance of eradicating child poverty, and by stating that the direction of the Government will be set to achieving that central objective.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that eradicating child poverty is a national mission for the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and society; welcomes the progress made in delivering the Best Start, Bright Futures: *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026*, with spend benefiting children in low-income households increasing to an estimated £1.4 billion in 2023; recognises the balance of action required across the three drivers of poverty reduction, which are income from employment, the cost of living and income from social security, as well as the need to drive improvements in wellbeing and outcomes for children and families; warns of the threat that UK Government austerity poses to the action and ambition of the Scottish Government in eradicating child poverty; notes

modelling that estimates that 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty in the current year as a result of Scottish Government policies; further notes modelling that estimates that a further 40,000 children in Scotland could be lifted out of poverty were the UK Government to make key changes to social security, including by introducing an Essentials Guarantee and abolishing the two-child limit, and calls on the incoming UK administration to work collaboratively with the Scottish Government and to follow Scotland's lead in taking ambitious anti-poverty action.

14:35

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I think that every member in the chamber agrees that we must eradicate child poverty, that no child should go to bed hungry and that every child deserves the best start in life. I genuinely do not believe that anyone on the Government benches thinks that that feeling is not held strongly by Opposition members. Likewise, those of us in the Opposition believe that every single member of this Parliament wants to strive to eradicate child poverty.

Like the First Minister, I speak as a father of two young boys, who I admit to having hugged a little tighter and held a bit closer in the past 48 hours, because the strength that young people provide us as families and our society has no barriers. It upsets me to see that so many children in Scotland are disadvantaged by poverty.

On the consensus point, I thank the First Minister for using this as his first debate and for leading a discussion in this Parliament on an important topic for those of us who are elected here and for our constituents up and down the country. I note that he repeated what he said when he was seeking to be First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, which is that eradicating child poverty will be his Government's single most important objective.

I believe that that is a laudable aim, but I must treat it with a degree of scepticism, because we were promised that closing the attainment gap would be Nicola Sturgeon's defining mission and that the then education secretary, the now First Minister, would not narrow the gap but close it completely, yet that gap has barely changed at all.

The First Minister's predecessor, Humza Yousaf, said that he would reduce national health service waiting lists following the pandemic. That was going to be the priority of his Government, but they have grown. A record one in seven Scots is on an NHS waiting list. A previous SNP First Minister, Alex Salmond, promised that the SNP would dual the A9 by 2025—next year—but instead of completing that work on that vital lifeline, it has been delayed by at least a decade or more.

Successive SNP leaders have promised to focus their Government on defining issues but have been distracted by their campaign for independence. The First Minister could set out a very strong and clear signal today that he really means what he has said previously in the chamber and what he has just said in the debate—that eradicating child poverty will be his Government's top priority—by ensuring that he puts that mission and not independence as line 1, page 1 of the SNP's manifesto.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Does the member think that it is a distraction to have lifted 100,000 children out of poverty?

Douglas Ross: I am saying that there is consensus. I do not think that anyone is trying to say that one party or the other has all the answers.

I will go over some of the issues that I hope the First Minister will take on board. I took him at his word when he said that he wants to listen to other parties. Too many children and young people are still in poverty in Scotland. It is welcome that some have been lifted out of poverty, but we have to do more.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will Mr Ross give way?

Douglas Ross: I am looking at the First Minister, the member's boss, who I think wants to come in first. If I have time, I will come back to Mr Stewart.

The First Minister: I hope that Mr Stewart will forgive me for getting in here.

Mr Ross and I know that he and I will never agree on the constitutional question—unless, of course, he changes his mind. There is always that possibility. However, I believe that the issues that I have set out relating to the overall context in which we operate are material, because the fiscal envelope in which we operate is material to our ability to tackle child poverty. Using our powers, we have expanded the resources available to us to invest in a Scottish child payment, for example. We could take other steps if we had wider powers as an independent Parliament. I do not see the constitutional question as a distraction in any way, and I hope that, in our dialogue in Parliament, it is not an impediment to Mr Ross and me finding common ground.

Douglas Ross: I do not believe that it is. That is why I came here today. I am leading this debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives because I think that it is right that we prioritise the issue. However, I also think that we have to show our priorities by our actions. People look at the statement by the First Minister and others that

independence will be on page 1, line 1 of their manifesto and wonder why eradicating child poverty, if that is the defining mission of the First Minister's Government, is not the number 1 issue in his manifesto.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Ross take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: Is there any time in hand, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Yes.

Douglas Ross: I will give way to Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: I am glad to hear Mr Ross say that the eradication of child poverty should be a priority for all of us. Will he try to persuade his Westminster colleagues to get rid of the two-child cap and the rape clause? That would help to reduce child poverty dramatically.

Douglas Ross: If Kevin Stewart and others will allow me, the way that I will approach this debate is by putting forward some of the things that we can do in the Scottish Parliament with its powers and the powers of the Scottish Government. It is right that we look at the issue that is in front of us today and what we can do to change things here.

A quarter of children in Scotland live in poverty. To go back to the Deputy First Minister's point, there has been progress, but a quarter of all our children in Scotland live in poverty. We have not done enough, we have not moved fast enough, and we need to do more. Almost a quarter of a million children live in poverty, and that level has remained largely the same since the Scottish National Party came to power.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 requires the Government to ensure that fewer than 18 per cent of children are living in poverty by 2023-24 and that fewer than 10 per cent of children are living in poverty by 2030. However, we are not seeing anywhere near enough progress on that.

It appears that, like health and climate targets, child poverty targets are simply more vague goals that the SNP Government hopes to achieve rather than objectives that it is delivering. The SNP Government has the power to create new benefits. Although I welcome the action that the First Minister has mentioned, such as the Scottish child payment, that is not enough. Under the SNP Government, the number of households in temporary accommodation has hit a record high. In 2023, more than 15,000 households were in that situation. That represents an 8 per cent increase on the previous year. As my colleague Miles Briggs said in his intervention on the First Minister, what makes the situation even worse is that 9,860 children were recorded as being in temporary accommodation in Scotland. That in

itself was an 8 per cent increase on the previous year.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I am sorry. If I have time at the end, I will come back to the First Minister.

In the 2021 election, the SNP Government promised to end homelessness and rough sleeping. It was going to end homelessness and rough sleeping, yet the figures are going in the opposite direction. How can the First Minister eradicate child poverty if thousands of children in Scotland do not have a permanent home right now?

Another issue that we should be considering is education. A topical question has just been asked about education. Conservative members know that good schooling and delivering opportunity for young people is the best route out of poverty for them. What chance do our most deprived children have if they are hungry and unable to focus on learning? That is why one of my first proposals as leader of the party was to pledge to deliver free school breakfasts and lunches to every school pupil across Scotland in primary schools. We were the first major party to do that, and I was encouraged when other parties had the same commitment.

Yet, more than three years on from the election, when that pledge was made by every party in the Parliament, the roll-out is still not complete, and there are warnings that it may now not be in place in time for the next Holyrood election. Can the First Minister or the Government give us a cast-iron commitment that every Scottish primary school will have access to free school breakfasts and lunches by the end of the current parliamentary session? That is a crucial point around which there is consensus and one that we all hope can be delivered.

The First Minister: Mr Ross sets out a laudable aim, and the Government is working as fast as it can to deliver on that objective. However, the challenge that Mr Ross has ignored in his contributions so far is the fiscal environment in which we are having to operate and the effect of the erosion of the value of public expenditure because of the inflation that we have wrestled with in the past two years. Is Mr Ross going to come on to acknowledge just how difficult the context in which we have made progress is? If we had not done what we did, relative poverty levels would be 10 percentage points higher than they are today. Will he acknowledge the challenges of the fiscal environment, which is very much the property of the UK Government that he supports?

Douglas Ross: I will acknowledge that the Scottish Government now has the highest-ever

block grant to spend here in Scotland to deliver—
[*Interruption.*]

If SNP MSPs can say that they do not have the highest-ever block grant, I am willing to hear that, but the truth is that more money has now come from the UK Government to the Scottish Government than ever before in the history of devolution, but we still find ourselves in a situation where a quarter of children are still living in poverty in Scotland.

Another issue that the SNP pledged to deal with is the poverty-related attainment gap. The SNP has seemingly backtracked on its promise that John Swinney was the man who would deliver. Shirley-Anne Somerville, whom he has just been speaking to, admitted last year:

“In reality ... I think that it would be exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to get to the point of zero.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee, 18 January 2023; c 24.*]

Is that now confirmation from John Swinney and his Government that they will not eradicate that poverty-related attainment gap?

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I will give way if I have time, or the ministers can come back to the point when summing up.

The Presiding Officer: You have a little time, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I have a little time. We will go for a hat trick, First Minister.

The First Minister: We should probably leave the footballing analogies for another day.

On the question of the poverty-related attainment gap, the Government remains absolutely committed to the agenda of closing that gap. However, I point out to Mr Ross that every educationalist will tell him that the relationship between educational attainment and poverty is absolutely fundamental. That is the core of the Government's agenda.

I come back to the point that Mr Ross has not really engaged with me on today, which is the fact that, as a consequence of the actions of the UK Government, the fiscal environment and the policy environment in which we have been operating until now have made our challenge more difficult.

Douglas Ross: What has made the actions of the Government more difficult is its priorities and the way in which it has chosen to spend the record block grant from the UK Government to the Scottish Government. It is up to the SNP to decide what its priorities are, and if its priority is eradicating child poverty, it needs to deliver that.

Presiding Officer, I have taken a number of interventions, so I will close by saying that the First Minister says that he has made eradicating child poverty his top priority, but the record of the SNP Government, in which he has served and which he now leads, does not give us much hope. Targets have been missed, sufficient progress has not been made and the focus has been elsewhere. If eradicating child poverty is to be the main aim of his premiership, it needs to be borne out in actions rather than just words. He cannot point the finger elsewhere, as we have seen him do during the debate already. He must use the powers of the Parliament and the resources of his Government to achieve it. There is clear consensus on that and we will hear more in the debate across the chamber about how we need to reduce poverty levels and eradicate the child poverty that we see in Scotland.

While we all speak warm words today, what hungry, cold and homeless children need in Scotland now is action. Let us deliver a better future for today's children and a better country for generations to come.

I move amendment S6M-13566.3, to leave out from “warns” to end and insert:

“notes that around 24% of children live in poverty in Scotland and that this rate has remained largely unchanged since 2007; recognises that the number of children in temporary accommodation has reached over 9,000, which is an 8% increase on the previous figure; calls on the Scottish Government to use the powers that it has to take action, rather than produce more strategies, to tackle child poverty; notes that the Scottish Government has abandoned plans to close the poverty-related attainment gap and that its plans to roll out free childcare have been described as ‘fragile’; agrees that the Scottish Government has failed to deliver all of the devolved benefits that could help tackle child poverty; regrets that the Scottish Government is reportedly returning £450 million of EU structural funds that could be used to tackle child poverty, and calls on the Scottish Government to work constructively with the UK Government to ensure that all children get the best start in life.”

14:49

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): As we have already heard, there is no issue that we debate in this chamber that is more important than the work to tackle child poverty; all parliamentarians desire to reduce the levels of child poverty.

I heard what the First Minister said about the desire for consensus in the middle of an election campaign. There will be many debates on the approach that we take to child poverty, but it is important that we start this afternoon with a degree of consensus and that we look to see where we can find common ground.

Back in 2017, every member of this Parliament committed to binding targets to reduce child

poverty by 2030. Watching those debates back, I think that that was Parliament at its best: we decided that we should set a target and aspire to do all that we can to meet it. Of course, many actions have been taken that the Scottish Labour Party has supported. The Scottish child payment is an example of that.

Currently, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee is really getting into the detail of the impact of the Scottish child payment across Scotland and the difference that it is making. In that evidence, we have had a lot of qualitative data on the impact that it is making and have heard about many positive experiences, but we need further quantitative data on the scale of the impact.

I recognise that the Government is doing modelling, but it often says that the child payment lifts children out of poverty, whereas I think that the data shows that it keeps children out of poverty. It is clear that we need to have that additional data, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will reflect on that in her summing up.

It is important that we reflect on how we measure the Government's progress towards the 2030 targets. Last week, the Poverty and Inequality Commission published its annual scrutiny report on the progress that the Government is making. We should be concerned by what is in that report, and I will share with members some of that. It said:

"In view of recent statistics and the scale and effects of actions taken over the last year, the Commission's opinion is that it is unlikely that the interim targets will be met. Furthermore, without immediate and significant action, the Scottish Government will not meet the 2030 targets."

It also said:

"Limited progress has been made ... Progress in other areas is slow or not evident at all ... The Scottish Government's next progress report cannot just point to actions already taken nor propose more small-scale tests of change",

and that

"such a fall, while not impossible, appears improbable."

It is clear that the Poverty and Inequality Commission exists to mark the Government's homework and to provide that level of scrutiny. Those calls on the Government to act further are clearly concerning.

Kate Forbes: We all take on board the constructive advice of the commission.

I want to ask a question about funding. The First Minister set out the fact that we are spending more than £1 billion on social security, the Scottish child payment and so on in addition to the consequential that we receive. Obviously, it would be a lot easier if more funding came as a result of the UK Government spending more on

social security and on interventions in child poverty. Can we be at all hopeful that the Scottish Government will be able to stop mitigating the austerity that has been coming from Westminster?

Paul O'Kane: I am glad that the Deputy First Minister is taking the work of the Poverty and Inequality Commission seriously. When I asked her about the issue when she was deputising for the First Minister last week, I do not think that I got such a detailed response. Indeed, she affirmed again that those poverty targets will be met. I am keen to hear about how exactly they will be met, given the scale of the criticism.

On the substantive point that the Deputy First Minister makes in relation to the Government's motion, of course we must ensure that we look at our social security system and that we have a fundamental review and reform it, because we know that it is not working. That is laid out in our amendment. I have commented on universal credit in this chamber on a number of occasions. That system that is not functioning well and is not supporting people, particularly those who are in work and who need that safety net.

If Labour has the duty and honour of forming the next UK Government, we must review and reform the whole universal credit system, because it is not working. It is clear that we will need to look closely at what we will inherit, because we know that the Conservatives will leave us with a very challenging set of circumstances. I will speak more about that as I progress through my speech.

The First Minister: Mr O'Kane is helpfully setting out that there is a UK context to this discussion. In my speech, I was anxious to make the point that a UK Government can choose to follow an agenda that either helps or hinders the Scottish Government's efforts to eradicate child poverty. I stress to Mr O'Kane the importance that I attach to an incoming United Kingdom Government taking purposeful decisions to help our agenda of eradicating child poverty, rather than hindering it, as has been the case up until now.

Paul O'Kane: The First Minister will note that our amendment recognises that there is, of course, a UK context to what we are debating today. Through policy interventions at a UK level, we must do everything that we can to eradicate child poverty. I remind the First Minister that that is what the previous Labour Government did in this country through our interventions to reform the welfare state, ensure that child benefits were paid and ensure that there was a national minimum wage—I know that he was a member of the Westminster Parliament when that ground-breaking legislation was passed. All those measures from 1997 to 2010 are at the heart of what Labour Governments do, which is why we

are so committed to reforming the social contract once again.

Before the First Minister's intervention, I was making the point that in-work poverty is of huge concern to me and other Labour members. We must do more to support people who find themselves working in a job while feeling insecure, not being well paid, not having their rights at work protected and being reliant on food banks and food parcels, which is something that the First Minister rightly spoke about in his speech.

That is why we have set out quite clearly that we need a new deal for working people. We need to increase wages in order to provide a real living wage, ban the use of exploitative zero-hours contracts and end fire-and-rehire practices, alongside providing from day 1 other rights that are vital to ensuring that people can feel secure when going to work and can bring home a wage that will support them and lift children out of poverty. As I have said, that work will sit alongside action to fundamentally reform the universal credit system in order to make it work far better than it does currently.

It is clear that we need to reflect on all the efforts and interventions that are required to reduce child poverty. I ask the Scottish Government to reflect on what was said in the Poverty and Inequality Commission's report and to consider its own decision making, which has created a number of challenges, not least in supporting people into work. I have raised in the chamber previously my concerns about reductions to the parental employability support fund, the removal of the parental transition fund and the slowed-down roll-out of the fair work agenda, given that we need to grow the support that is available.

I point to the cross-party work of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, which has looked at a number of important pilots and innovative pieces of work across Scotland on those issues. For example, I highlight the work of Fife Gingerbread—which will be known to the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice—to support employers and to support people back into work. Such organisations are vital, and we must do all that we can to support those sorts of interventions.

I call on the Government to look at what it can do to support more local initiatives at local authority level, because we must ensure that we work across all spheres of government. The First Minister spoke about the relationship between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, but we must also recognise the relationship between the Scottish Government and local government, given the particular challenges that have resulted from cuts to local government funding during the

period in which the First Minister has been a member of the Government.

I will begin to draw my remarks to a conclusion. We all want action to reduce child poverty—there is a degree of consensus in the chamber about that. However, the Government must reflect on the fact that, in the 17 years in which it has been in power and has had the levers of power in Scotland, child poverty has sat at the same level—it is 24 per cent, which is the same as in 2007; indeed, on many measures it has gone up.

An incoming UK Labour Government will focus on ensuring that we make the changes that we have to make so that people who are in work do not experience the same levels of poverty, and to fundamentally reform the social contract in this country. That is clearly the action that we would take and would want to take. We will work constructively with any Government and anyone who shares that vision and ideal to ensure that we take significant action to reduce child poverty and take steps towards eradicating it, because that is the right thing to do.

I move, amendment S6M-13566.2, to leave out from first “eradicating” to end and insert:

“child poverty should be a national mission for the Scottish Government, but deeply regrets that after 17 years of a Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, child poverty levels, after housing costs, have remained static, and that the most recent child poverty single-year statistics estimate that the number of children in Scotland living in poverty has now increased in 2022-23 to 260,000; acknowledges that the Poverty and Inequality Commission's Scrutiny Report, published last week, provided a damning assessment of the SNP administration's progress on tackling child poverty across a number of areas, noting that progress from the Scottish Government 'is slow or not evident at all'; disagrees with the Scottish Government's decisions to slash the affordable housing budget, freeze the Scottish Welfare Fund, abandon parental employability schemes and decimate the Fuel Insecurity Fund, all of which act as barriers to prevent more children in Scotland falling into poverty; recognises that SNP inaction has been coupled with 14 years of dire economic mismanagement under the UK Conservative administration, which has led to increased child poverty rates across the UK; condemns the fact that, despite professing to tackle child poverty under successive First Ministers, child poverty is increasing, and the Scottish Government is now set to miss its interim reduction targets and its own legally-binding child poverty targets in 2030; urges the Scottish Government to heed the advice of its own expert advisors and take immediate and decisive action to reduce poverty across Scotland in the face of a decade of SNP inaction and failure, and welcomes the Labour Party's plan to introduce a New Deal for Working People to deliver a real Living Wage, review Universal Credit and build a fairer social security system, tackle the cost of living crisis with a publicly owned clean energy company that would help to pay to keep bills down, paid for with a proper windfall tax on record oil and gas profits, deliver affordable public transport and housing support, end problem debt, and provide help and support for families and households across Scotland.”

15:00

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank all the organisations that have provided such thoughtful and informed briefings for this debate.

In the First Minister's foreword to "Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Progress Report 2023-24", which is the latest progress report, he wrote that eradicating child poverty in Scotland is his

"top priority"

and that he will

"leave no stone unturned"

in seeking to achieve that aim. I and the Scottish Greens share that commitment, and I would like to suggest some substantial stones that we might usefully lift together and look underneath.

For this is a critical moment. As we have heard already, according to the Poverty and Inequality Commission's scrutiny, as highlighted by Save the Children, achieving the interim targets is "possible, but not probable", and the commission says that work towards the crucial 2030 target is

"not at the scale necessary to deliver the transformation required."

We have been here before. Let us at least learn something from our shared experience with Scotland's climate targets, which began with congratulation on their ambition, but which were allowed to coast and plummet from challenging to improbable to practically impossible, and were left so late that they ultimately had to be abandoned. We cannot let that happen again, because to abandon the child poverty targets would mean abandoning many thousands of children to the pain, hunger, exclusion and stigma that poverty brings. However, as with the climate targets, business as usual will not enable us to reach them.

That is why the proposed amendment that I had hoped to speak to this afternoon called on the Scottish Government not just to consider the commission's scrutiny but to act on its recommendations. Ultimately, this is a crisis not of shortfall but of inequality. We know that, above a modest level, it is not the average income in a country that affects children's wellbeing but the level of equality. We do not need to wait for more economic growth to carry out active redistribution. That is why one of the commission's recommendations is specifically about tax policy and using the fiscal tools that we have to build our children's future.

The Government has pointed out that Scotland does not have the powers that it needs to do that easily or to do it alone. I agree that we need

independence in order to grow the future that children deserve but, in the meantime, there is much that we can and must do. First, we can put pressure on the Westminster parties, especially from within, so it is heartening to hear some degree of consensus across the chamber this afternoon.

A new report that came out just this weekend—the latest update to the "Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs" statistics, produced by the centre for research in social policy at Loughborough University—shows the devastating effect of the savage two-child limit. The next UK Government, if it is to have any credibility as a caring alternative to the brutalities of the past 14 years, must abolish that limit as one of its most urgent priorities. I know that many members here agree that that should be done, and I am disappointed to see nothing about the two-child limit in either of the two Opposition amendments. There is, of course, much more that a UK Government could do, including abolishing the benefits cap and taking action on the Child Poverty Action Group's call for an increase in child benefit.

Secondly, we can and must give real support to local authorities and put an end to policies that make it harder for them to meet the needs of children in their areas. Never again must the comfortable win council tax freezes while neighbouring families are out in the cold.

Thirdly, we must act here, wherever and however we can, including by increasing the Scottish child payment to £40 a week, recognising its transformational impact. The child payment is transformational. We should congratulate ourselves on that, but we should not stop there; we must go further. We must dare to implement effective taxation and targeted spending, holding child poverty before us as a clear and focused lens for absolutely everything else that we do.

We need to know what would make the greatest difference by actioning the work on priority family types recommended by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, the disaggregated data called for by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, and the gendered approach advocated by Close the Gap. We need to listen—really listen—to those who know, and cannot help but know, exactly what they are talking about.

This situation is not new. In 1999, the Child Poverty Action Group published a book called "Poverty First Hand", which was based on the understanding that

"poor people, like other oppressed groups, have a right to speak for themselves; that it is important to ask them what they think and that discussions and developments which include people's first hand views are likely to be more effective and make more progress than those which don't".

It is time that we began to place that insight not just in discrete lived experience panels but at the heart of all that we do here. Each decision that we take, whether on policy, priorities or budgets, makes a tangible difference, either directly or indirectly, to real children and real families now and to those in the future, too. That difference can mean sufficiency, comfort and celebration, or it can mean deprivation and despair—and no hope. The choice is ours, but the consequences are very much borne by others. It is imperative that we act.

15:06

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats want Scotland to be the best country in the world for young people to grow up in—and I am sure that that is the view of everyone around the chamber. However, for years now, the number of children in poverty in Scotland has been around a quarter of all children. Recent statistics show that such figures persist: in 2022-23, 26 per cent of children in Scotland were living in poverty.

Poverty and hunger can be major factors that prevent children from achieving their potential. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament, set statutory targets to reduce the rate of child poverty to less than 18 per cent by 2024 and less than 10 per cent by 2030. The statistics from 2022-23 indicate that it is almost certain that the 2024 target has not been met. Experts including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation had warned the SNP Government that it was likely to miss its target, and the Government's own modelling said the same thing.

The increases in the Scottish child payment are welcome, but all hopes cannot be pinned on one policy. Tackling child poverty demands a joint effort from across government, encompassing housing, investment, jobs and childcare. Liberal Democrats support the removal of the two-child limit and the benefits cap. We instigated the introduction of free school meals for primary school children in 2014, and we support the extension of free school meals all year round for all children in primary 1 to primary 7.

The cross-party group on poverty, of which I am the deputy convener, recently commissioned a report into rural poverty. Estimates indicate that 18 per cent of children in rural Scotland are in relative poverty, and 12 per cent are in severe poverty, after housing costs. However, those figures do not reflect the higher costs impacting on rural households, and they are therefore likely to underestimate the experience of poverty among children in rural areas. The cross-party group's report highlighted that access to childcare is a significant challenge for rural and island families.

Difficulty in accessing childcare is a driver of poverty and a source of significant stress for families who depend on childcare for employment security. That is particularly relevant for women, who account for the majority of single parents and are more likely to be primary caregivers.

The lack of access to childcare manifests in various ways: a straightforward lack of local childcare provision, the cost of the provision being prohibitive for parents on low incomes, or a lack of flexibility from employers and childcare providers, making travel arrangements unfeasible or too costly.

The level of childcare provision in rural and island areas can be the determining factor in whether women can enter paid work and in how many hours they can work. That is exacerbated by the cost and frequency of rural public transport options. In that way, lack of childcare provision traps many women and their children in poverty.

Child poverty in my Shetland constituency, as in Scotland as a whole, has been increasing since the early 2010s. Figures from Shetland Partnership highlighted that, due to the higher cost of living in Shetland, 47 per cent of people did not earn enough to have an acceptable standard of living in 2021. Even in households where adults are working and earning what could be described as a decent wage, financial hardship might be a risk or already be experienced. Just yesterday, I heard from a constituent who asked whether there is any additional help for low-income families over the summer holidays, highlighting that summer activities and childcare are too expensive for her family.

Shetland Islands Council ran a project called anchor, to focus on early intervention and prevention. That led to the creation of anchor for families, which works alongside families to assist them to access financial support and benefits and to provide practical help as well as a listening ear so that they can express their concerns. The success of the anchor project shows the importance to families of being heard and having a service that they can turn to.

Poverty-related stigma continues to have damaging impacts on children and young people, from feelings of shame to barriers to participation in education. Efforts to end child poverty must acknowledge the complex factors that create the conditions behind poverty and must address the impact of poverty-related stigma on children.

It is right that eradicating child poverty is a priority for the Scottish Government, yet the SNP has had 17 years in government to make it a priority.

We need action to adequately fund local authorities to provide services for families in need;

ensure that the childcare sector across all of Scotland can provide the levels of flexible provision that parents need; recognise that gender inequality and women's poverty are linked to child poverty; extend free school meals to all primary school children, all year round; and ensure that key rural policy is developed through an anti-poverty lens.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. I advise members that, at this time, there is some time in hand for interventions, should members feel so inclined.

15:12

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Eradicating child poverty is important to me for four very important and simple reasons: their names are Daisy, JJ, Rosie and Molly—my grandchildren. There is another reason. As many members will know, my family is from Ferguslie Park in Paisley, and there is no silver spoon in anybody's gob when they are born in Ferguslie Park. That has been the case for generations in Paisley. This has always been important to me, because I know that, when people come from that type of background, we have to work harder, we have to be better and we have to move further forward than people from different circumstances.

Although members will have different beliefs and destinations, we must have consensus in this debate. I make no apology for this being a very personal and emotional speech. Like everyone else, I want the best for my children and all the children in Scotland. My own children are now in their 30s, and I have grandchildren. If we cannot strive for a better future for the weans of Scotland, what is the point of the Scottish Parliament? What is the point of us being here? That is the future, and that is what we all want to do. We always want a better future for the next generation.

My kids, James and Jessica, came along when I was a young man in my early 20s. Perhaps I might have been too young, but it meant that I am now one of the youngest and coolest papas in Scotland. I know that it is not cool to say that, because my grandkids will remind me of that later on.

For many families, your early 20s is the time in life when you have your children, and it is a time when you do not have wadges of cash coming into the house. That is a challenge that most families face, and it is the stage when financial support is needed. That is why it pleases me to hear the First Minister say that eradicating child poverty in Scotland is a national mission and will be at the very centre of his first programme for government.

It is important to me that every child in Scotland gets the opportunity to achieve all that they can.

That is why I am proud that the Scottish Government has lifted an estimated 100,000 children out of poverty this year, despite the challenges of UK austerity, Brexit and the Westminster cost of living crisis. Despite all that, our SNP Scottish Government delivered an estimated £1.4 billion to benefit children in low-income households in 2023-24, while still having to spend £134 million this year to mitigate the effects of UK austerity.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I was also a young parent, at 20, which is why I support One Parent Families Scotland's campaign for the UK Government to stop discriminating against parents who are under 25. Does George Adam share my view that that is not appropriate?

George Adam: It may have been a long time ago, but I remember what it was like—for me, not for Ms Maguire—to be a young parent, so I support that campaign.

The Scottish Government has supported Scotland's families while at the same time having to deal with cruel Westminster policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap.

I have no doubt that members will hear everything I have said being said again by my SNP colleagues, which is only right, because we should be telling everyone in Scotland about what the Westminster Government is doing and saying that only this Scottish Government can make the difference so that we can move forward and have the best possible tomorrow for our children.

The only opportunity to have the Scotland that we want will come from independence. With independence, we will no longer be a pawn in the unionist Westminster battles between Labour and Tories. We will let Scotland's people make Scotland's choices. Surely, it is only logical to progress further to create the kind of tomorrow that we all want for all Scotland's children. That is how I look at it when I see Daisy, JJ, Rosie and Molly. I want what is best for them and I trust the Scottish people to make the correct decision about their future.

I have been involved in politics for long enough to see that there is never any real change when you are part of the UK and Westminster system. It stays the same. The colour changes from red to blue, but Scotland gets forgotten. That is why, with independence, the SNP can break that failed UK political cycle. Independence is the only change on offer for our children's future.

Even with the devolved settlement, the Scottish Government is making progress in lowering the rate of child poverty. Reported child poverty rates

are lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. That does not happen by accident: it happens because we make children our priority for the future. Those figures will improve in the coming years because of the positive decisions and actions taken by the Scottish Government to prioritise children. Those policies include the expanded Scottish child payment.

All political parties in the Scottish Parliament should get behind that endeavour. Now is the time for petty political squabbles to be left aside, as we look to our children's future. I hope I have articulated why eradicating child poverty is a priority for me. It is the way for us to build a better tomorrow. We should never take our eye off the ball, because our children's future is far too important. That future might be the "undiscovered country"—I am not quoting "Hamlet" but "Star Trek"—but, as our children make the journey towards it, we must provide a light for them as they travel.

15:18

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am really glad that the First Minister called this debate, because the submission from Save the Children powerfully says:

"It is unacceptable that after 25 years of devolution 240,000 children are living in poverty every year in Scotland."

That is coupled with the report from the Poverty and Inequality Commission that child poverty figures are broadly the same as they were five years ago, and a report from Audit Scotland that states:

"The Scottish Government has not yet demonstrated a clear shift to preventing child poverty",

which

"is higher than when targets were set in 2017."

This situation is deeply unacceptable, so I commend the First Minister for declaring that eradicating child poverty will be his single most important objective. I believe him when he says:

"My Cabinet will do everything in our power—including listening to and working with members across the chamber—to achieve our aim",—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2024; c 24.]

so I trust that he will listen carefully to something that worries me about today's debate.

Something fundamental is missing from the motion and was missing from the First Minister's comments, which makes me worry that the silo thinking that has historically plagued this Government continues and that, unless it is addressed, the First Minister's mission will fail.

Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills agreed absolutely with me when I suggested that one of the key ways to tackle child poverty is through education. In 2020, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, a certain John Swinney, said:

"Education is the greatest antidote to poverty we have."

That was not news, because the foreword to the 2018 tackling child poverty delivery plan says:

"If we can help deliver the skills, support and experiences children and young people need to fulfil their ambitions, we will together make Scotland the economic success we want it to be, with very low levels of child poverty."

Those were wise words from John Swinney, yet neither the motion nor the First Minister in his opening remarks explicitly and specifically talked about education. That concerns me because, unless we think holistically about solutions, including addressing this Government's historical shortcomings on education, there must be a significant risk that the ambition is doomed to fail.

Without a laser focus on education, things will be missed. For example, this Government does not collate data on children who are missing from education, unlike what happens in England. I wrote to the education secretary on 12 January asking whether she would urgently reconsider that, but I have yet to receive a substantive written answer. When I raised it last week, she pivoted to talking about persistent absences. I understand why. She told us that data shows the figure rising significantly, but she did not set out any substantive actions. On both of those crucial issues that impact children's education and, therefore, poverty, many will perceive a worrying lack of urgency.

What of those who are in school? The Child Poverty Action Group has told us of its survey in which 97 per cent of young people who responded said that food is very or quite important in feeling ready to learn at school and that hunger has a serious impact on learning and concentration. The SNP manifesto commendably promised the provision of a free breakfast and lunch to all primary school children by August 2022, but that promise has been broken and delayed. The group says that, for children who are currently struggling and missing out, there is no time to wait, yet free school meals are not mentioned in the motion and they were not mentioned in the First Minister's comments.

Kate Forbes: The member's comments about setting out the wider context are critical. I noted earlier the absence of the words "poverty-related" when talking about the attainment gap. Does he accept that the actions of this Government in rolling out free school meals and the Scottish child

payment are all designed to try to lift children out of poverty but that we would all be doing much more if they were not in poverty in the first place? I do not want to make this political, but we cannot escape the 14 years of challenging economic circumstances and austerity, which have taken more children into poverty.

Liam Kerr: I accept that the Government is working towards its aims, but Kate Forbes cannot ignore the fact that this Government has been in power for 17 years and we are in the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world, yet we are still in this situation. My point is that education has to be part of the mix in finding solutions, but I am afraid that that was manifestly not part of the mix in either the motion or the First Minister's opening comments.

The First Minister also did not mention the 2021 manifesto promise to provide a free laptop or other digital device to every pupil in Scotland—a promise that was broken and undelivered. I could list further examples, but my point is that we are in a context where, just last week, the Renaissance report “What Kids Are Reading” showed that, by the time pupils in Scotland reach secondary 2 to 4, they are reading at least three years behind their chronological age; where the programme for international student assessment data shows plummeting reading, maths and science scores, with one at record lows and two below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average; where Scotland—I say this to Kate Forbes—has an attainment gap that remains terrifyingly wide; and where teacher numbers are plummeting, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, and violence is soaring.

In that context, it cannot be right that the Government brings to the chamber a debate that fails to give due priority to John Swinney's words that

“Education is the greatest antidote to poverty we have.”

We must tackle child poverty, and I genuinely commend the First Minister for calling the debate and setting that priority. However, the debate and the issue have to involve looking at all the factors and seeking outcomes—unlike his predecessor's soundbite of making education their party's number 1 priority.

The amendment in Douglas Ross's name accepts the bulk of the motion but ensures that the focus is on those matters for which this Parliament—which is the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world and has the largest cash-terms block grant in devolution history—has both agency and funding. That conversation cannot—must not—happen without thinking holistically and factoring in education. That is why I encourage the

Parliament to vote for the amendment in Douglas Ross's name.

15:25

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I note that the First Minister asked for a constructive debate. Hope springs eternal, First Minister, but you have to listen to me anyway.

The motion states:

“eradicating child poverty is a national mission for the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and society”.

I hope that we can all agree on that. However, the Labour Party's amendment seeks to remove that acknowledgement, which is kept even in the Conservative Party's amendment, although I must admit that I was quite taken aback by the simple fact that the Conservative Party had lodged an amendment to the motion, given Westminster's continuing failure to protect the most vulnerable in our society, its obsession with austerity and a promise of more of the same—or perhaps even worse.

I turn to the substance—if I can call it that—of the Conservative Party's amendment. I am not sure whether it is wilfully ignorant or deliberately misleading, but I will call it deliberately misleading. To state that

“the Scottish Government has abandoned plans to close the poverty-related attainment gap”

is simply untrue. The 2024-25 budget maintained the Scottish Government's commitment to invest more than £1 billion, over this parliamentary session, in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. That is a fact.

Douglas Ross: Will Bill Kidd reflect on the comments that I read out earlier? Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, said about the poverty-related attainment gap:

“In reality ... I think that it would be exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to get to the point of zero.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 January 2023; c 24.]

That is the point that we make through our amendment.

Bill Kidd: I thank Douglas Ross for his statement and question. We are talking not about zero but about better than zero—about people not being in the position of having been born into poverty and staying stuck that way for the rest of their lives. However, I will leave it for the cabinet secretary to come back on that, because I think that she has heard that a couple of times today, and, as far as I am aware, she will be summing up.

The Conservative amendment also calls on the Scottish Government

“to use the powers that it has to take action ... to tackle child poverty”.

That suggests inaction so far. However, actions that have been taken have ensured that roughly 100,000 children are being kept out of poverty. That, too, is a fact.

Let us not forget the fact that the Scottish Government now spends well over £100 million a year to mitigate the effects of 14 years of Tory austerity, including cruel UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. Research by the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions found that, only one year into its introduction, the bedroom tax had forced the poorest in our society to cut back on food, and had pushed more than half a million tenants into rent arrears and the potential threat of homelessness. At the time, it was described as the Tories’ latest

“weapon in the war on the poor”.

Members should imagine its impact 10 years on from now, if they can.

The gall that I spoke about earlier is eclipsed only by the frankly incomprehensible reference in the Conservative amendment to the positive impact that European Union structural funds can play in tackling child poverty. That comes from a party that campaigned for a disastrous hard Brexit, has continually demonised the EU and its institutions, and continues to deny the people of Scotland the opportunity to form their own relationship with EU nations.

We hear more of the same from Labour—a party that is also firmly wedded to Brexit and the damage that it has done and continues to do. I would have hoped for more from the Labour Party, the self-styled champion of the poor, but we see that, more and more, it is joined at the hip to the Tories by Keir Starmer.

Michael Marra: Does the member recognise that the last Labour Government lifted 1 million children out of poverty across the UK? We are “self-styled” by the facts.

Bill Kidd: I do not deny anything about the fact that the Labour Party has done things over the years at Westminster. I have to say, however, that it would have to keep those policies in place and, as I mentioned, Mr Starmer is a gentleman who has no intentions of doing that.

I would have hoped that the Labour amendment would have recognised the damage that the bedroom tax and the benefit cap have inflicted and continue to inflict on some of the most vulnerable in society. Despite the fact that leading children’s charities including the Child Poverty Action Group,

Barnardo’s and Save the Children, as well as the children’s commissioners for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, have written to party leaders in the House of Commons demanding the removal of the two-child limit policy, Mr Starmer, disregarding those pleas, has vowed to keep those horrific policies, which target the poor and vulnerable. I am afraid that no one in Scottish Labour has the ability to turn that over. It is a very obviously unfair policy, but I am afraid that Scottish Labour does not have the power over British Labour to effect that.

Paul O’Kane: Will the member give way?

Bill Kidd: I have nearly finished.

Both the proposed Green Party amendment and Labour’s amendment mention the work of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, and I thank the commission for its work. However, Labour’s amendment rather disingenuously uses that work to discredit and denigrate the efforts of the Scottish Government in tackling child poverty. Maggie Chapman’s proposed amendment, in the name of the Greens, calls on the Scottish Government to act on the recommendations in order to deliver the transformational change that is required to meet Scotland’s targets, and I welcome that approach.

We face a huge challenge in eradicating child poverty—a challenge that we should all accept. We need the money from Westminster at this time. Unfortunately, we do not have the support from the rest of this Parliament in order to get that, but I encourage all members to support the Scottish Government in its aim.

15:32

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): When I looked this morning at the various briefings that had come in for the debate, I was, in a sense, a bit depressed, because I feel that I have, throughout my adult life, been involved in campaigns to try to eradicate poverty. When I heard George Adam speak earlier about Ferguslie Park, I remembered visiting it back in the days of Strathclyde Regional Council and seeing some really innovative projects that were in place then, including a project to support women and women escaping domestic violence. It was about building confidence and having opportunities to access the training and skills to go on to employment. Over many years, a lot of work has been done; it is important that we recognise that and that we do not always try to reinvent the wheel.

I very much welcome the First Minister’s statement, in which he says that, after the election, we can have a positive and constructive debate and discussion about how we can tackle poverty in Scotland. As someone who has campaigned for

most of my adult life for devolution in Scotland and greater powers for Scotland, that is what I always imagined this Parliament would be about—tackling the issues that impact on people every day in their life. Sadly, we have sometimes gone away from that completely.

I agree with Liam Kerr—we have to think holistically across government, if we are serious about tackling the issue. We need to recognise that there has to be partnership and willingness to work together in terms of the roles of government, which includes the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local government. If we are serious about eradicating child poverty in Scotland we should never underestimate the role that local government has to play.

In the UK we have experienced not only post-2010 Tory austerity but an attack on the poorest people in our country that has set us way back from the achievements of the last Labour Government. I remember that, as a teenager, I campaigned on Cowdenbeath High Street with the National Union of Public Employees, which at that time was pressing for the introduction of a minimum wage. People would come up, take the leaflet and say, “Look, son. You’re wasting your time. That’ll never be achieved.” Well, it was achieved, under a Labour Government. Although the current approach to the living wage has not gone far enough, it does its bit to support people and to give them a half-decent wage to live off.

The introduction of the working families tax credit had a massive impact. As Michael Marra stated earlier, last year more than 1 million children were lifted out of poverty through such measures. The Scottish child payment, which I have applauded and welcomed, demonstrates that stabilising income has a key part to play in tackling poverty—in particular, child poverty.

I say that income is one part of the holistic approach that I have mentioned, but if we are serious about eradicating poverty we need to look at the other issues that exist. Labour’s previous policy on working families tax credit was about making work pay by ensuring that, if people were able to get into work, they could have a half-decent living. That approach made a massive difference, as any member will know if they have ever talked to people whom Labour’s policies on working families tax credit enabled to get jobs or obtain support to do so. If we are to empower people to get out of poverty, we have to empower them into employment.

As part of that approach we must examine, for example, taking a holistic approach in our colleges. If the First Minister is serious about having such a discussion, we need to look right across that sector. We need to look at our colleges

in order to ensure that they are far more focused and can support people to come out of poverty.

The First Minister: I agree with much of what Mr Rowley has set out, and I endorse the holistic approach that he has described. However, Mr Rowley must accept that at the heart of the challenge that we now face is the public spending situation. That is the issue that troubles me most about the outcome of the forthcoming election. From what I have heard, I do not see a discernible shift in the public expenditure profile, which will be crucial to affording the direction of policy that Mr Rowley is, quite rightly, setting out to Parliament. I am not hearing that from the commitments that the Labour Party has made about what it will do, should it win the election.

Alex Rowley: What I have heard from the leadership of the Labour Party at UK level is that it will be “laser-focused on poverty” in this country. As leaders come into office they will review policies in the light of the major challenges that will be left after successive failing Tory Governments. That commitment to be laser focused on tackling poverty is the start of that process. The review of universal credit will be another part.

I therefore have hope, but I also believe that if we are to achieve the best for Scotland and tackle poverty, we will have to work across the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local government. We must end the division that gets in the way of having in place the right policies to tackle poverty.

I see that the Deputy Presiding Officer is looking at me, so I am afraid that my speaking time is up.

15:39

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate. I welcome the First Minister’s commitment to eradicating child poverty. In my remarks I will concentrate on how social security can have an impact on such poverty. I will also share some of the evidence that the Parliament’s Social Justice and Social Security Committee has received on the impact of the Scottish child payment.

Child poverty is a stark reality for many children and families. The compassion that we have for the welfare of our children is something that should define our country.

It is clear that the Scottish Government’s actions are already making a difference. Modelling that was published in February estimates that the SNP Scottish Government’s policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Almost £430 million has been put in the pockets of families through the Scottish child payment, which is supporting more than 329,000 children. That is

a significant intervention that is making a real difference to the lives of many people across Scotland. As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I have heard from many witnesses about the impact of the Scottish child payment. For example, in evidence, Professor Danny Dorling of the University of Oxford said:

"I started looking at the statistics in the late 1980s, when Scotland had some of the worst rates of child poverty in the UK. Now, according to the simple poverty line proportion, every region in England is worse than Scotland."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 17.]

Unfortunately, however, we also heard that the full potential of the payment is being held back by the UK welfare cuts. Ruth Boyle of the Poverty Alliance was clear about that. She told the committee that

"right now, the UK system is actually pulling people into poverty. We know that 90 per cent of people who are in receipt of universal credit are going without essentials".—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 30 May 2024; c 10.]

We received damaging evidence about the two-child policy and the abhorrent rape clause, and how it is directly affecting children. Professor Ruth Patrick of the University of York advised us that,

"it is common to hear parents talking about trying to protect their children from the impact of poverty. They will say, 'I'll skip a meal because I don't want my children to go without,' but what we find with the impact of the two-child limit is that parents are reporting that their children are trying to protect them from the impact of the poverty. They report examples where children are not telling their parents that they need a new pair of school shoes because they know that the money is not there. We have evidence of people being in supermarkets with children telling their siblings, 'Don't ask mummy for that, she doesn't have the money.'"—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 19-20.]

If we are to have an honest debate about child poverty, we must consider the harm that is being done to children by those policies. The human impact of Westminster policy is appalling and considerable.

The Child Poverty Action Group recently highlighted a case from its early warning system, of a working couple with three children who had had their universal credit

"reduced by the 2 child limit and a deduction for rent arrears."

The family was not able

"to get a cake or any presents"

for

"their youngest child's birthday",

and the family

"hoped the child would be too young to remember."

That is heartbreaking, but those are real cases. That callous approach, which erodes dignity and denies children a basic level of subsistence and enshrines misery, must end.

It is not just the two-child policy that is holding back progress; other policies including the bedroom tax and the benefit cap are, too. In 2022-23, Scotland spent £84.9 million on 135,625 discretionary housing payment awards to help to mitigate the effects of those policies and others. Although we must do everything that we can with the powers that we have, it is disingenuous in the extreme not to bring to the table in this debate the dreadful impact of a Westminster system that is lacking in compassion and support.

The UK Government now spends £50 billion a year less on social security than it would have spent if cuts, freezes and other charges since 2010 had not happened. CPAG is clear that,

"These cuts have pushed hundreds of thousands of children and families into poverty."

Whichever party forms the next Westminster Government must, therefore, step up and scrap the two-child policy instead of saying that it can make that policy and the abhorrent rape clause, fairer. The approach of saying, "Trust us—we did good things before" just does not cut it now.

Paul O'Kane: Marie McNair is making a passionate speech. She referred to a family who were in work and in receipt of universal credit. Would she agree that we need a new deal for working people, that we need to increase wages to a living wage and that we need to ensure that people's rights at work are protected so that they can afford things in order to ensure that they have good quality of life? Does she agree with that policy?

Marie McNair: I will get on to that.

As Professor Danny Dorling of Oxford University pointed out,

"the economic inequality between families did not alter one iota in the years from 1997 to 2010."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 8.]

A reference to the so-called new deal for working people is pretty ineffective when the BBC reports that the trade union Unite has failed to endorse Labour's manifesto. Unite has said that it does not go far enough in protecting workers' rights.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Marie McNair: I am about to conclude.

Every child should be able to thrive and reach their full potential. It is clear to me and many others that if Westminster is not willing to play its part in eradicating child poverty, real change will come only when Scotland is independent.

15:45

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note the motion and the Scottish Conservatives' amendment, and it is to that amendment that I wish to direct my remarks. I also note the First Minister's opening remarks. In that vein, I will highlight a couple of avenues towards eradicating child poverty that I believe may have slipped from focus. I thank the Scottish Women's Budget Group for its briefing for today's debate. The point that it raises—that child poverty is intrinsically linked to women's poverty and inequality—is well made. Its briefing states:

"In this year's budget, there were several decisions made which will likely impact on the achievement or otherwise of Scotland's Child Poverty targets. These include cuts to further and higher education funding, reductions in employability funding, reductions in the affordable housing supply programme and standstill funding for School Age Childcare. It is unclear whether the Scottish Government assessed the consequences of these changes".

Let us look at some of those consequences. I again bang the drum for the work that was done by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on parental employment, which highlighted how well the process could work not only to take children out of poverty but to support single parents and parents in low-paid work. The committee evidence was clear that work must be done to fix three areas that are holding people back from taking that avenue out of poverty: childcare, transportation and upskilling.

How can the Government claim to be eradicating child poverty if it does not address all those issues? Not only is it refusing to address that issue, but we are actually moving backwards. Last year, Fife College had to close a fully subscribed course at its Kirkcaldy campus because the bus timetable changed and no one could get to the class on time. Surely, sensible communication costs nothing.

Perth College UHI has been forced to consider cutting courses and closing the on-site childcare facility—that covers two of the three issues—because of funding cuts to colleges. If the 1,140 hours of funding truly followed the child, that would not happen.

Early years childcare is also failing. Audit Scotland's report on early learning and childcare states:

"This is a flagship policy which underpins broader ambitions to reduce child poverty and to support economic transformation. Around £1 billion is invested in it annually. But the sector is fragile."

That is £1 billion of investment, but we are not getting it right. The offer is so disjointed across Scotland that parents face a postcode lottery. Some councils provide a place immediately after a

child's third birthday, but other children have to wait until the start of the next school term, which in some cases is months, before being allocated a place. A resident in Fife contacted me last week when they received a letter advising them that they would not get a childcare placement in Edinburgh at all because they lived in Fife, which is in direct conflict with the Government's 1,140 hours policy.

Finally, as the Scottish Women's Budget Group highlights, in-school childcare, or wraparound care, has financially stagnated. It is almost non-existent in many areas of Scotland, and the number of childminders is diminishing at an alarming rate. We know that a good, encompassing education is a key factor in making positive changes and leading a child out of poverty. It was not that long ago that the Government's top priority was exactly that.

We have heard in the debate that former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon stated loudly in 2015 that her aim was to close the attainment gap completely. However, as Douglas Ross noted, Shirley-Anne Somerville, who was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills at the time, in January 2023, said:

"In reality ... I think that it would be exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to get to the point of zero."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 January 2023; c 24.]

She admits there, as if we needed her to, that for all the warm words on an election podium, it is what happens in practice that matters.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Does Roz McCall agree that it is very challenging to tackle poverty in any way, shape or form unless all levels of government are on the same page? As the First Minister says, the UK Government can either help us or hinder us. The point that I made then and the point that I make now is that we can either work together, including during the next Scottish Government budgetary process, or we can just do speeches in the chamber. I invite Roz McCall, as well as doing a speech in the chamber, to genuinely come forward with costed proposals for every piece of policy that she wishes more to be spent on. She and I can then genuinely work together on that, rather than challenging each other back and forward about a quote. The invite is there.

Roz McCall: I thank the cabinet secretary for that invite. What I am trying to highlight in my speech is that the SNP's plans have already been costed and put forward, and they are missing the mark because the focus has moved.

Does that mean that we no longer try? If we look at the statistics—the SNP Government must have

done so—we can see that the attainment gap for national 5 pass rates has widened. That is what is shown by the statistics in the Scottish Qualifications Authority monitoring report for 2023, which was published in August last year. It states that, in 2023, the gap between the most and least deprived pupils obtaining an A to C grade at national 5 level stood at 15.6 per cent, which was an increase on the levels seen in 2020, 2021 and 2022. The attainment gap for pupils obtaining A grades in their highers was at its highest level since 2017. In 2023, the gap between the most deprived and the least deprived students obtaining an A grade for highers was 23.4 per cent, which was the highest level since 2017, and the attainment gap for higher pass rates widened for the third year in a row. The gap between the most and least deprived pupils obtaining an A to C grade at higher level stood at 16 per cent in 2023, which was wider than it was in 2022 and double the gap in 2021, when it was 7.9 per cent.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Will the member give way?

Roz McCall: I am just about to conclude, but I will take an intervention.

Jenny Gilruth: I appreciate the points that Roz McCall is making in relation to the poverty-related attainment gap, but she is comparing years in which pandemic arrangements were put in place. That meant that we looked at a broader range of evidence. The attainment gap today is narrower than it was in 2019, before the pandemic began. Does Roz McCall recognise that and the progress that has been made thus far?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms McCall.

Roz McCall: The point needs to be made that we have moved on from the pandemic, and we need to see actual changes happening now.

In conclusion, eradicating child poverty is a national mission—I do not think that anyone in the chamber disagrees with that—but I am deeply concerned that we will find ourselves looking back at another broken promise unless all avenues are explored. That is important. The SNP Government is disinclined to do that at this time, and it is Scotland's children who will pay the price.

15:53

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It has felt like a very tumultuous time in politics for at least as long as I have been elected. However, that is how politics is—there always seems to be another event. It is always good to be able to take a step back and remind ourselves that, whatever is going on—whether that is an

election, a pandemic or Brexit—the SNP remains true to its principles. That is what we are seeing today.

We stand for independence for Scotland not as an end in itself, but as a reaction and a solution to a litany of failures by successive UK Governments. It is a route to a fairer and more equal country that is free to take what we believe and know is the right approach, supporting those who need that most, and keeping public services, such as the NHS, free at the point of need, regardless of which family a person was born into. That is the kind of country that can end child poverty.

We are not independent, but we use whatever powers we have—however much we wish we had more—to keep children out of poverty. Whatever else we hear today, that is working. We have not ended child poverty yet, but that is our ambition, and that ambition is reflected in our actions. It is estimated that the SNP Government is currently keeping 100,000 children out of poverty this year. Next year, there will be more because we stand by our principles.

What I want to speak about today on the topic of child poverty is housing and homelessness. Interestingly, that is what many of my Opposition colleagues' contributions have focused on so far. It is promising that we are agreed on the issues, and my hope is that we can build some consensus on the solutions in the next few months.

We know that anyone who spends time homeless is more likely to struggle and experience severe mental health issues and addiction, and more likely to die early. That includes children. We know from Shelter statistics that children who grow up in poor housing conditions have up to 25 per cent higher risk of severe ill health.

Children living in homelessness are three to four times more likely than others to have mental health problems, even a year after they have been housed. The longer that children spend homeless, the more entrenched their poverty becomes, and they are more likely to experience it for the rest of their lives. Those children's futures are being written before they have had a chance to plan them, and we cannot tackle child poverty without tackling homelessness. The Housing (Scotland) Bill gives us an opportunity to address that, but its success is not a given.

Now that a housing emergency has been named, I hope that my good friend the Minister for Housing will look at what is not working and what might work. The housing to 2040 strategy is not addressing child homelessness or the speed of rehousing families who are in temporary accommodation. I know that the will and the

urgency are there, but the policy has not quite caught up.

Miles Briggs made the point that more children are spending time in temporary accommodation every year. He is right, and the First Minister is right that our record on affordable housing is record breaking, but that is sadly not changing the tide of children who are living with homelessness. We will pay the price for that when those children are more reliant on our public services as they grow up, and those children will pay a higher price for living all their lives with that trauma and those impacts.

I know how the experience of homelessness sits with a person, no matter how far away they may seem from it. I am on a good wage, I have a secure home and it has things in it that I used to be too scared to buy in case I had to move quickly and leave them behind, such as houseplants, my own set of tools and my cat. However, any time I miss the train home and I have to stay in Edinburgh for an extra night, any time I momentarily forget which part of my rucksack my house key is in, and every time I think about the future choices I will make about studying, careers and family, it all comes crashing back. So I know that all those feelings of fear and the fierce insecurity of not knowing if you will ever be okay do not go away, even if you become a member of Parliament.

Homelessness does not just happen. It is almost always preventable. It is not just about how many houses exist, it is about safety nets. People do not give up the roof over their head easily and, by the time that they do, they have lost and left behind far more than most will be able to imagine. During that time, they will come into contact with council services, the DWP, Social Security Scotland, headteachers, social work and many others. We need to take those prevention opportunities.

Our house building should also react better to local housing need and the asks of those who are currently registered as homeless to build the types of houses that those people are waiting for. In the Highlands, people are not crying out for three-bedroom and four-bedroom houses with lovely driveways in the suburbs, but for one-bedroom properties in the city centre with access to public transport. We have seen award-winning developments such as those at Raining's Stairs by Inverness castle, which are small flats in the middle of the city and are exactly what people need.

The biggest barrier that I have noticed with countless other Governments is getting a party, once it has achieved power, to do what it said it was going to do, not to drop its principles at the sight of the first bad poll. The SNP stands here year after year, committing to progress and then

making progress, leading from the front and using leadership to bring people with us. I look forward to chatting to Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat colleagues. Many of us agree that we need to tackle homelessness as its own issue, not solely look at it in terms of house building.

I hope that, when we debate the Housing (Scotland) Bill in the chamber, it becomes more obviously a tool to tackle and prevent child homelessness.

15:59

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): The SNP wants Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up in and it wants every single child to be able to reach their full potential. Crucial to that is eradicating child poverty, which, as we have heard, is the First Minister's top priority. "Best Start, Bright Futures", which is the Scottish Government's framework for tackling child poverty, sets out many of the cross-cutting policies that are required to achieve that. I welcome the progress that has been made.

The SNP Government recognises the balance of action that is required across three critical drivers: income from employment, the cost of living and income from social security.

With regard to employment, we must ensure that parents have access to good, stable and flexible jobs that pay the real living wage as a minimum. We must also support parents who are out of work into the labour market. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee recently finished an inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. We heard success stories from people who have used the Scottish Government's employability schemes. However, a sustainable exit from poverty will never be only about securing and retaining a job. That is why the Scottish Government is taking wide-ranging action to tackle poverty.

The cost of living remains a significant challenge for many families. The current Tory-made cost crisis builds on the damage of years of austerity. Rampant inflation has affected food prices, energy costs are still way too high and the UK welfare system is broken. The tale of the two Governments could not be clearer: the SNP created the Scottish child payment and the Tories cut universal credit; the SNP introduced the carers allowance supplement and the Tories are trying to claw back a quarter of a billion pounds from carers; and the SNP built a new social security system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect, while the Tories delivered the rape clause.

Despite the challenges of UK austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis, the SNP Government

is delivering almost £3 billion to support people through the cost of living crisis and £134 million in 2024-25 to combat Westminster austerity through mitigations.

Today, we have heard from Labour that the previous UK Labour Government lifted 1 million children in the UK out of poverty. As a headline, that sounds good, but in a recent evidence session at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, we were told by Professor Danny Dorling that the previous UK Labour Government tipped children from being just below the poverty line to being just above it. He said that that was something that

“Children and their families would hardly feel the effects of”
and

“that the economic inequality between families did not alter one iota”—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 8.]

over Labour’s period in office. He also mentioned that children who grew up under new Labour had stunted growth—a hallmark of poverty that is more akin to what we would expect to see in the United States, rather than in a European country.

Paul O’Kane: Will the member take an intervention?

Collette Stevenson: I would like to continue, thank you.

That is the record of new Labour, which Conservative members want to highlight, for some reason. Things do not look much better for a future Labour Government. Sir Keir Starmer has pledged to maintain Tory fiscal rules and cruel policies such as the two-child limit.

The SNP Government, on the other hand, is delivering seven unique benefits, including the Scottish child payment of £26.70 a week per eligible child, which benefits 329,000 children in Scotland.

Alex Rowley: I would dispute what the member said. That aside, does she support the view of the First Minister, who told us that we should start to work together to tackle child poverty instead of just throwing insults across the chamber?

Collette Stevenson: I whole-heartedly agree with the First Minister on building consensus when it comes to eradicating child poverty. The question that I put back to the member is, if Labour forms the next UK Government, will it scrap the two-child cap and the rape clause?

Professor Ruth Patrick described the Scottish child payment as

“a really well-targeted policy”

that corrects the UK Government’s

“divorcing of the relationship between need and entitlement.”

On household income, Tom Wernham from the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated:

“The Scottish child payment will have significantly increased the incomes of people who are well below the poverty line”,

while Professor Dorling said:

“What really matters is to take families ... out of ... deep poverty ... That was not included in the target for the new Labour Government”.—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 4, 8.]

In contrast, the SNP Government’s choice has been to raise the incomes of the poorest households, and modelling suggests that Scottish Government policies will keep 70,000 children out of deep poverty this year.

The SNP’s progressive policies are making a real difference to children right across Scotland. The baby box, the provision of 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare and the game-changing Scottish child payment are key components of the Scottish Government’s mission to eradicate child poverty.

However, with Westminster holding many key powers over social security, the next UK Government must introduce an essentials guarantee and abolish the two-child limit. Those changes could lift 40,000 children in Scotland out of poverty overnight. If Labour gets into Downing Street, it should stop trying to imitate Tory policies and look at the positive difference that SNP policies are making to people in Scotland. Otherwise, more and more people will recognise that Scotland needs the full powers of independence to build a better country.

16:06

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is my view, as it has been the view of everyone who has spoken in the debate, that the overarching priority of the Scottish Parliament should be to tackle, reduce and eradicate child poverty. Child poverty is a huge challenge that our country faces. It limits the opportunities of children in every town, and it deepens the inequalities that already exist in our society from the second that a child is born. It should shame us all that child poverty remains as prevalent as it is in our country today.

Week in, week out in the chamber, we discuss the modern, inclusive and progressive Scotland that we think exists, but the shocking reality is that, according to the most recent estimates, child poverty levels increased in 2022-23, with 260,000 Scottish children now living in poverty. That is nothing short of a national disgrace, and we must redouble our efforts to address it.

Such figures represent more than just a number; they represent the dark and difficult reality for so many children and their families across Scotland. The situation is unjust and unacceptable, and we in this Parliament must do all that we can to fix it.

I will make this statement because I believe that it is core to the way in which people are treated in this country. I have made it clear previously, and I make it clear once again, that I deplore the Tory Government's attack on working-class people. In my view, the Tories are the friends of the rich and show no interest in redistributing wealth to those most in need. I accept that political decisions that are made in Westminster affect what happens in Scotland, but, as I often say in this Parliament, we must be honest about what we can do and what our responsibilities are in Scotland.

John Swinney, Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon all promised—quite rightly—to eradicate child poverty, but those promises to young people and their families have been broken. We have presided over virtually static child poverty rates since 2014, and we all need to acknowledge that.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Is Carol Mochan aware that, when Labour left office in 2010, it left 3.6 million children still in poverty?

Carol Mochan: That is the reason why I fight every day—while there are children in poverty, we should all accept that we must do more, so I do not understand why SNP members suggest that we should not be doing more.

The Government must listen to what experts are telling us. Last week, the Poverty and Inequality Commission published a damning report that laid bare the SNP's progress on tackling child poverty. Progress has been slow and the Government is not predicted to meet its child poverty targets. I welcomed the fact that the Deputy First Minister accepts the report and says that she will take those recommendations seriously and use them as the basis for how we proceed to tackle the issue.

Today, families bring up their children in a Scotland where the richest continue to own the wealth while those from our most deprived areas work on low wages to create it. We must do something about that. In a modern, inclusive and progressive Scotland, that is what we need to do. I believe that we can do it and that change can come. I say to the Parliament again—in saying this, I look to the SNP benches—that we have to think about what we can do, what the Parliament can do and what the Government can do. We should lead with the message that it is only when every child does well that we will all do well. That would be a good message to put out in Scotland.

I have a particular ask, which I believe that the Government could achieve, on the issue of free school meals eligibility. I have raised the issue in the chamber on a number of occasions. We are waiting for the Government to meet its commitment to roll out free school meals, and we have heard about the challenge that it seems to be having in doing that. I have been working with charities such as Aberlour, which has talked about how we can quickly help families who are struggling. It believes that expanding free school meal eligibility is one tangible action that could make a real difference to those who are living in poverty. That is a change that could be made relatively easily.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): For those children who are entitled to free school meals under the scheme, that acts as a passport benefit that gives many other additional cost-saving measures to their families. It is within the Scottish Government's gift to push the scheme and to actively seek out families who are entitled to free school meals, notwithstanding the Government's policy to roll it out across primary schools.

Carol Mochan: I was going to go on to say a similar thing.

I encourage the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice to respond on that issue in her closing remarks. We have brought the issue to the chamber a number of times, and I have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on it. That is a real change that could be made now. I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice to consider working across portfolios to get the measure in place as quickly as possible.

I do not have much time left, but I want to say that I hope that members will support the sentiment of Labour's amendment around working people and making sure that work pays. Labour has a clear plan for delivering a new deal for workers, which would make a big difference in helping people to come out of poverty.

My final words on the matter are that, to do something, we need to have the political will. I ask the Government to have that political will and to look at what more we can do. I thank the Government for agreeing to work across parties to get this right. No child should live in poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We will move to the final speaker in the open debate. Just a few too many conversations are being had around the chamber.

16:13

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Like everyone else in the chamber, I want

poverty to be consigned to the history books. I am sure that everyone in the Parliament wants that to be the case, but wanting to see an end to poverty and delivering policies that will bring about that change are very different matters. We all recognise that no single policy will eradicate child poverty and that, as long as Scotland does not have the full powers of an independent Parliament, there will be decisions that are outwith the hands of whoever is leading the Government in Scotland.

I welcome the recently published annual progress report, which covers the Scottish Government's actions to tackle child poverty and reveals that almost £1.4 billion has been invested to support children in low-income households in the past financial year.

Key policies covered in the report include the awarding of almost £430 million to families through the Scottish child payment, supporting more than 329,000 children as of 31 March 2024; widening the eligibility for best start foods, which helps low-income families to access nutritious food so that thousands more children and pregnant women can benefit; supporting around 4,400 children through continuing work to develop a system of school-age childcare and continuing to provide 1,140 hours of funded childcare for all eligible children; providing free bus travel to 727,000 children and young people as of March 2024; and delivering 6,045 affordable homes across Scotland between April and December 2023, with two thirds for social rent, helping an estimated 2,115 households with children into affordable housing.

The SNP's track record on tackling child poverty is further backed up by modelling that was published in February 2024, which estimated that SNP policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Even amid the difficult financial challenge that it faces, the SNP Scottish Government is choosing to find the money to provide badly needed additional support. That is in sharp contrast to the current UK Government, which is funding tax cuts for the rich by taking money away from low-income households.

After 14 years of austerity, the Tory Government is finished, with Sir Keir Starmer expected to be the next Prime Minister. However, as UK Labour prepares to change the wallpaper in Downing Street, I pose this question: what is the point in Labour replacing the Tories if the red rosette offers nothing different from the blue? The First Minister has made eradicating child poverty his top priority, but Westminster policies such as the two-child limit, which Sir Keir Starmer has refused to commit to scrapping, hamper the SNP Scottish Government's progress. Carol Mochan spoke about different policies, but Labour has suggested that it will support bankers' bonuses, too.

After his election, the First Minister wrote to Sir Keir Starmer on 12 May, requesting a meeting to discuss shared goals and values on tackling child poverty. I understand that the Labour leader has yet to reply to that invitation, but the position is beyond disappointing, as Labour has an opportunity to deliver a Westminster reset on tackling child poverty after it wins the election—which, judging by the opinion polls in England, it will certainly do down south. Not only has Sir Keir Starmer failed to do that thus far in the campaign; he is vowing to adopt the same approach to public policy and spending as the Conservatives. That will do nothing to alleviate child poverty. Instead, it will shrink household budgets even more, and for low-income families in particular.

Carol Mochan spoke about listening to the experts.

Paul O'Kane: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: Haud on a minute.

Labour MSPs can try to defend Sir Keir all they want, but I urge them to listen to this quote from the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Paul Johnson. Last week, he said that

“neither party – the Labour and Conservative Party – is really addressing the big problems that they'll face if they win the election.”

He went on to say:

“The numbers that we've got from the Chancellor, which the Labour Party have not demurred from at all, imply big spending cuts over the next five years”.

The IFS reckoned that those Tory and Labour Party plans would mean a massive £18 billion of cuts. Another think tank puts that figure closer to £33 billion. That is vital money being taken away from Scotland's public services, meaning less money for the NHS and schools, less money to tackle poverty and less money to help families with the cost of living crisis.

Both Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer are committed to imposing even deeper cuts to public services. That is not my assessment but the assessment of independent figures. What is more, Save the Children published a tweet this morning that said that, while child poverty has been largely absent from the general election debate so far, there is no issue more important for Governments to get to grips with.

Liam Kerr referred to 17 years of the SNP Government and 25 years of devolution when he was speaking about child poverty, but 4.3 million children living in poverty in the UK is hardly a ringing endorsement of the union.

Sadly, the issue of child poverty continues to be at the top of the agenda in my constituency. Just

this week, it was reported in the *Greenock Telegraph* that record numbers of families are seeking the help of Children in Poverty Inverclyde, which is proof that the Tory cost of living crisis is making life harder for families. Sadly, after this election, no matter which of those two parties wins, the fact that there will be at least £18 billion of cuts coming from the UK Government will not help Scotland, it will not help the UK and it will certainly not help my constituents in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

16:19

Maggie Chapman: Poverty is a slow violence that strikes children and those who care for them in the heart and in their bodies, their minds, their hopes, their dreams and their futures. However, it is possible to change that for hundreds of thousands of children in Scotland, and if it is possible, we must do it.

Rowan Williams, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in his afterword to “A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age”, the original landmark report for the Children’s Society, that love is at the centre of a child’s needs. By love, he explained, he meant not just warm feelings, but

“long-term commitment to someone else’s wellbeing as something that matters profoundly to one’s own wellbeing”.

By that definition, what we are called to do here is to love, because our commitment to the wellbeing of Scotland’s children matters profoundly to us—to each of us as individuals and to the collective moral legitimacy of this Parliament.

We must not treat challenges as exceptions and excuses for failure. A just, UK-wide response to the Covid pandemic could have lessened inequality instead of increasing it. The so-called cost of living crisis, popularly blamed on war in Ukraine, is in reality a cost of greed opportunity, with both energy and food corporations making record profits.

We are now in a permanent state of exception. Our climate-changed future will bring more shortages, more extremes of cold and heat and of rain and drought, more conflicts and, quite possibly, more pandemics, striking the unprotected with the hardest blows. All are reasons to act, not excuses for failure.

The co-benefits of principled action, investment in children’s futures and preventative spend—instead of dealing only with damage—are all potentially immense. We can heal our planet as we heal the wounds of poverty-ridden childhoods.

It is a daunting task, but we must act now and act together; we must be brave, radical, creative and revolutionary. Again, I commend the commission’s final recommendations, which we have heard so much about in the debate. They are recommendations for cross-party action and consensus building with civil society and, crucially, with the ultimate experts: the families, parents, children and young people who know, in their own lives, what it is to live in poverty.

We must do all that we can now, while we are here, but we must also give children and their carers—present and future generations—the tools that they need to hold successive Governments and public bodies to account. A human rights act for Scotland can contain those tools. Human rights are not only about voting, fair trials and freedom of protest or speech. They are about the most fundamental aspects of human life: health, housing and food; education and being at work; the air that we breathe and the water that we drink; and the rights to learn and to play.

I could not let this afternoon’s debate go by without asking the Scottish Government to reaffirm its commitment to introducing the promised human rights bill. We need to make use of all the levers that we have to tackle child poverty, but we also need to ensure that we have routes to remedy when a child’s right to food, education, a home, a family life or any of the other rights that we hope that the bill will include are not realised. We must have mechanisms of enforcing the provision of basic standards for all. Further, we must ensure that we support children and young people—and their families and communities—to understand and know what their rights are, so that they might better realise them. A human rights act for Scotland can be central to delivering all that, and not living in poverty must certainly be one of the ultimate goals of us all achieving our human rights.

I will finish with some stark words from the very end of the 20th century. They come from a member of a lone parents’ group in Glasgow and were quoted in “Poverty first hand: Poor people speak for themselves”. The children whom the speaker was talking about will be adults now—perhaps still in Scotland, perhaps with children of their own, perhaps flourishing or perhaps not. The speaker was possibly their mother, perhaps their father or maybe another lone caregiver. They said this, about those children:

“they should have a childhood and they don’t have a childhood now.”

16:25

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister began today’s debate by hoping to set aside the general election context that I know is taking up a lot of members’ time at the

moment. We are all working in a fevered atmosphere.

An election is, rightly and necessarily, a cause of promises and the setting out of intent—telling people what we would do with the opportunity to serve, should we be granted the honour of doing so. Part of today’s conversation has turned on the promises and reassurances that different parties have given people at different times and on whether we have followed through on those.

Colleagues from across the chamber have been keen to point out the many other driving, number 1, or defining priorities of the 17 long years of this SNP Government. The poverty-related attainment gap is as wide as ever and the policy on that has been abandoned. Climate targets were set and celebrated, but action was limited and those targets were abandoned. There is a national mission on drug deaths, but figures out today show that drug deaths are up by 8 per cent and that rates are still four times higher here than they are anywhere else in the UK.

The First Minister has an opportunity now, as he takes on the role of leader, to set out his own vision and intentions for the country. I know that he has, in some respects, been delayed in doing so because of the election. However, he has been at the heart of Government for the past 17 years. The things that I referred to are his responsibility too, and I know that that will weigh on him.

The drug death figures published today are themselves a complex symptom of poverty. They are deaths of despair, discrimination and deprivation, and they correlate very tightly with poverty, more so in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. Those deaths may not be an immediate symptom of child poverty but, for many, they are the end point. They are what happens when children are brought up in poverty—many of them lose their lives.

I fully agree with the First Minister that there is a strong Westminster context to what we have discussed today. We all acknowledge that that is the case. We also know that 100,000 children have, in the language used in the Scottish Government’s own analysis, been “kept out” of poverty and that the Scottish child payment is fighting against a prevailing trend and a tide that is difficult to swim against.

This country’s economy is built in favour of the few and tends towards chaos. At the moment, stagnation seems to be trumpeted as some kind of triumph by the Prime Minister. In this economy, and under the policies of all Governments, one in four children in this country is living in poverty. That is scandalous. The poor in this country are markedly worse off than the poor in almost any

other part of Europe, and the cuts made to social security since 2010 are a major driver of that.

We desperately need a change of Government in Westminster. The sooner that that happens, the better. We need a new policy approach. We need new values, decency and a shared common purpose across these islands.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome the approach that the member has taken so far in his closing remarks. Does he agree that the reduction in social security is one of the biggest drivers of poverty? With respect, I have yet to hear Labour members say what the party would change in social security. I am not talking about getting people into work, which is a different policy that we can discuss another time. The intent at the moment seems to be to keep the rape cause and other policies that the member has just spoken against.

Michael Marra: The cabinet secretary is right to say that those are significant issues. Labour members want to see the two-child cap removed as soon as possible and see that as part of a fundamental review of universal credit.

The First Minister said earlier that “the fiscal envelope in which we operate is material to our ability to tackle child poverty.” That goes for every Government, and it would be irresponsible of Labour, just as it would be on the part of the SNP, to set out commitments that we could not afford to make. We will treat the matter—rightly—in the round. It is a moral issue and it is also, of course, a question of priorities. We will—rightly—be challenged by other parties on the priorities that we set out, but I believe that we will, as we have done before, fundamentally change the life circumstances of children in this country.

One of the SNP back benchers said, “The approach of saying, ‘Trust us—we did good things before’ just does not cut it now.” However, it is incumbent on us all to look at the evidence of what happened. At the moment, all the evidence that we see from the Poverty and Inequality Commission, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children is sounding a loud alarm that achieving our 2030 target for ending child poverty will be at serious risk unless the Government, in combination with other parties, significantly changes its approach.

When we look at promises being kept, the best guide, to be frank, is what has been done in the past. Alex Rowley summed that up well in a speech that was redolent of and heavy with hope—a word that is not used much around these issues. We have to treat that hope carefully. At one time, the minimum wage seemed impossible to many people, but it was realised. We also introduced working families tax credits, which lifted

1 million children across this country out of poverty. Alex Rowley was also right to highlight the fact that colleges in this country could have a significant impact on young people's life chances, not by giving them money but by giving them focus and purpose, with an understanding of what colleges are for. College principals tell me day after day that they still do not know what their purpose is or what job they are meant to have been given by this Government.

Beatrice Wishart pointed out the role of local authorities and the cuts that are being made there. She also made an important contribution on gender and the gender analysis.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I note the member's comments about the drivers of poverty and about hope. He will know that one of the key drivers of child poverty is imprisonment. We know that, broadly speaking, imprisonment does not work, so I am interested that Labour said recently:

"Labour will fix the prisons crisis by driving through a prisons building programme".

Given his comments on hope, how will that help to reduce child poverty?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: It is fair to say that the prison estate in this country is a very significant problem. I think that that is recognised by the Government's front bench. There is absolutely no chance that we could continue to have the justice system as it exists at the moment, let alone ensure that it is in a better form, without renewing the prison estate across the country. There is no doubt that that is going to cost a lot of money, and it is a long-term project. However, I would reject any idea that we do not have to replace some of the prison estate and provide better, high-quality accommodation for people in our communities.

It is vital that we continue to have as much consensus as we can on these issues; that we recognise the fiscal and challenging restraints that exist underneath them; and that, together, we make the right choices to reduce child poverty and change the outcomes for young people in the interest of the future of Scotland.

16:33

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): There is a great Scottish saying that it takes a village to raise a child. I agree with that. The First Minister mentioned that children and young people are our future, and they absolutely are. We should all want—as I believe we do—the best start in life for our young people, so that they can realise their potential.

As Douglas Ross and other members have done, I very much welcome the debate and the opportunity for Parliament to discuss the policies that have been supported collectively, across all parties, to try to address the level of child poverty in Scotland. As we have heard, the issues of child poverty are multifaceted and, as George Adam mentioned, intergenerational.

As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I promoted the committee's undertaking an inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. The working groups and lived experience groups that we set up and the visits that we undertook helped to shape the committee's report, which Parliament debated recently. In particular, the parents whom we met in the Western Isles demonstrated how they were making ends meet by working many jobs. The transport and housing issues that they face were as important as anything else.

In the time that I have, I want to focus my comments on housing policy and a few other issues that have not been discussed, because it is key that housing outcomes be included in the Government's drive to address child poverty in this country. As was the case earlier, I make no apology for consistently highlighting the unacceptable issue of children, young people and pregnant women being placed in temporary accommodation by councils.

As Crisis says in its briefing that homelessness is the most acute form of poverty. In our debates, we often speak about adverse childhood experiences. What could be more adverse than becoming homeless as a child or young person, or being born into homelessness?

What do we know about children's and young people's experience of homelessness? More than 16,000 children are officially homeless in Scotland today—that is the highest number on record. Households with children spend longer than the national average in temporary accommodation. Research suggests that, often, children who are in temporary accommodation arrive at school tired, late and hungry, that they struggle to maintain friendships and that they are likely to experience greater mental health and behavioural concerns.

Homelessness among young people aged 16 to 24 is more than twice the rate of that among older people, and young women are disproportionately affected. As Douglas Ross stated, one in 20 households in Scotland now contains someone under 25 who states that they were previously looked after by a local authority.

Young people are also more likely to experience hidden homelessness. Just this morning at the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, we heard that around 12 per cent of

all students and young people report experiencing homelessness during the course of their studies.

What more can be done? The homelessness prevention review group put forward some welcome recommendations about homelessness services being designed to meet the needs of young people.

The Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is currently before the Parliament, contains measures to ensure that services work together to prevent homelessness, and we all welcome those. However, we need to make sure that there is a focus on having an outcome.

I welcomed Beatrice Wishart's comments about the negative impact of homelessness on tackling poverty and about the lifelong stigma that homelessness often builds. I recently visited the Rock Trust in Edinburgh to see a new policy called upstream Scotland that it has put in place. It is working to develop a preventative model by identifying young people who are at risk of homelessness in the first place. I do not know whether the First Minister has had a chance to see that or to visit the trust, which is piloting its projects in schools in Edinburgh, West Lothian and Perth and Kinross. I certainly hope that he will look at the policy, which I want to be in the Housing (Scotland) Bill because it will make a huge difference.

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Will Miles Briggs take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: Absolutely, if I can get some time back.

Paul McLennan: I will be very quick. Mr Briggs and I have a meeting coming up this week, and I am happy to discuss the points that he has raised. I, too, have visited the Rock Trust and seen its fantastic work.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree with the Minister for Housing. I hope that we will all add value through the shaping of the Housing (Scotland) Bill by such projects, which are not currently being funded.

For example, the Community Help and Advice Initiative, in partnership with Children 1st, is reaching out, in a school setting, to families who are in need of advice to make sure that that early intervention approach happens.

That said, as an MSP for Lothian, I am seriously concerned that the City of Edinburgh Council is struggling to find the solutions that are needed to address the housing crisis here in the capital: 25 per cent of all children who live in temporary accommodation are here in the city of Edinburgh. It is important that there is a bespoke solution for Edinburgh. I will also argue for that when the Housing (Scotland) Bill is progressed.

The Scottish Government's declaration of a housing emergency is a first and welcome step forward, but we need the Government to bring forward workable solutions.

Access to early years childcare and support for vulnerable young people have been mentioned by several members this afternoon. My colleague Roz McCall made important points on how early years childcare policy is failing to deliver for parents and families. That was highlighted in the Audit Scotland report that found that the childcare sector remains "fragile" despite the expansion of free childcare.

My colleague Liam Kerr made valid and important points, particularly about children and young people who are missing from education and the fact that, in Scotland, that is not even recorded. There is a growing concern that a hidden generation of young people is not in education or employment.

There are two important issues that were not raised during the debate that I want to touch on. One is the levels of poverty among Scotland's ethnic minority communities, which remain—disproportionately—higher than in the general population. Statistics show that one in five is living in relative poverty, which is 43 per cent of minority ethnic children in Scotland. We need to ensure that that matter is never neglected and, specifically, that it does not miss out on a bespoke solution in policies that the Government brings forward. Clearly, there are specific contributing factors that are negatively impacting on that group, but we need to ensure that there is focus on them.

Health, too, has not been touched on by many members, but I am concerned about some of the reports that we have been seeing post-pandemic that say that, statistically, children's health is not being addressed. I recently co-chaired an event here in Parliament with Jackie Baillie to launch the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's report, "Worried and Waiting: A Review of Paediatric Waiting Times in Scotland". That report is deeply concerning. It suggests that 48.9 per cent of children in Scotland are waiting more than 12 weeks to see a paediatric specialist and that in Lothian, again, 69 per cent of children are waiting for more than 12 weeks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is not here for the debate. When he came along to the launch event he said that he would report back to members. We have not received that report, but it is quite clear that we are facing a crisis in paediatric health services in Scotland, for which, although it was not mentioned, the Government needs to take responsibility. Interestingly, the statistics show that, in 2012, just 1 per cent of children waited more than 12 weeks; now the figure is almost 50 per cent. We need to

see action and it needs to be among the solutions and work that the Government says it wants to take forward.

Today has demonstrated that there is cross-party consensus that the best way to tackle child poverty is to ensure that parents are in fair work and can access employment opportunities. The First Minister has made it clear, both today and on taking up the job of First Minister, that eradicating child poverty is the single most important policy objective for his Government. We welcome that, and we want to work with the Government to ensure that that priority is achieved.

We are ambitious for that commitment to be matched with bold action, but simply setting a target in Parliament will not deliver that. We need to see outcomes being delivered on the ground, and our health service and our councils need to be funded and given the support that they need to achieve that.

Conservatives will support the Government and offer suggestions, but I hope that today has given us an opportunity to see that the challenge is not an easy one, although I hope that it is one on which the Government can make progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to wind up the debate. Cabinet secretary, you have a generous 10 minutes.

16:42

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The First Minister, rightly, laid out in his opening remarks that eradicating child poverty should be a joint endeavour. In my closing remarks, I very much hope to reach out again, across the chamber and to those outwith the chamber, in relation to that endeavour that we all share. He also, importantly, raised the context in which we do that. It is important, as we look to solutions, that we recognise the parameters in which we work. The austerity that has now been on-going for some time, the Brexit challenges that we have and the cost of living crisis affect different people and communities in different ways, but their effect is tangible and real, and they are some of the main drivers of poverty that we see in our society today.

The First Minister also asks us to work collaboratively, and we have heard from across the chamber, I hope, that there is agreement that that is, indeed, the only way that we will be able to tackle systemic issues such as child poverty or the climate emergency. A member pointed out earlier in the debate that the Parliament is often at its best when it comes together. One of those times was when we passed the act involving the child poverty targets. I think that that is a lesson, and also a warning, for all of us. After this debate,

when we have come together to seek consensus and to agree that eradicating child poverty is a joint endeavour and that we should do so together, what then do we do in terms of the action?

As we have seen with the climate change actions that follow on from the climate change targets, we often come together as a chamber to support a target or a piece of legislation to drive change, but then, when people come forward with actions, we see the supporters start to step away. The Government must rise to that challenge. We have not been blameless on that in the past. As a minority Government, it presents a challenge for us all to rise to, by asking how we could take those actions forward, collectively.

Douglas Ross: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I look forward to hearing Douglas Ross's suggestions for how we could do just that.

Douglas Ross: The cabinet secretary said that her Government had not been blameless. Will she explain to the public where it has failed on the issue, so that we can all understand the problems that the Scottish Government is tackling, and where it has failed in those areas?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The First Minister and I have made it clear many times in the chamber that poverty levels in Scotland remain too high. As the Government, we clearly have to take responsibility for that. Regardless of the context, we are the Government and we must do everything that we can. I will come on to the actions that we are taking, but we will always take our share of responsibility and endeavour to see what more we can do.

The Conservative and Labour amendments provide suggestions for ways forward and for avoiding certain dangers that we might get into as we discuss the issue further. I know that Miles Briggs has for some time had an interest in measures to tackle child poverty. In his remarks he mentioned housing. The housing charity Crisis has pointed out that the biggest challenge on homelessness in Scotland is the freeze on local housing allowances designated by the Westminster Government. That is an example of a context in which Miles Briggs and I could come together to discuss homelessness, and I hope that he will meet Mr McLennan later this week to do so. However, we must do that within the context of seeing how we can work on it at different levels of Government.

Several Conservative members suggested ways in which we should be spending more money—on education, colleges, school breakfasts and lunches, or housing. We heard many demands for additional spending, and we will take them on

board. Labour has taken a similar approach—indeed, that is set out in its amendment, which asks us to spend more money on housing, the Scottish welfare fund and tackling fuel poverty, as well as several other areas. However, I am also quite intrigued by what would be taken out of the wording of the Scottish Government’s motion if the Labour amendment is agreed to. That amendment would delete a warning about Westminster austerity and the threat that it poses to our goals on child poverty. It would also remove reference to the fact that we could take 40,000 more children out of poverty with an essentials guarantee and an end to the rape clause, and it would remove calls on the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to follow its lead in its ambitious anti-poverty action. Therefore, as we look to the proposals that are emerging, we can tell a party’s motives from what it wants to remove from the motion that it wishes Parliament to pass, not just what it wishes to add through its own amendments.

The issue of what will happen at UK Government level is exceptionally important. It has been raised before, but it is important to stress that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has discussed what it calls “a conspiracy of silence” between Labour and the Tories on the plans for cuts. It says that the fiscal rules will have to lead to £18 billion of sharp cuts if those plans are implemented. That will be a challenge for any incoming Government, regardless of its colour.

It is also important to see how other parties deal with such issues. The Scottish Government is providing £1.4 billion-worth of support to low-income families with children, which approximates to the amount raised through our work on progressive taxation. That demonstrates why this Government’s decisions on progressive taxation have been so important. They have been criticised by others—by the Conservatives, which I would expect, but, disappointingly, also by Scottish Labour. That presents us all with a challenge in how we rise to demands for more money and how we in the Parliament can improve the situation by raising money through progressive taxation. Those two challenges are integral to how we tackle child poverty. There is the challenging UK fiscal context, in which we have a 9 per cent cut in the Scottish Government budget; a reduction of almost 60 per cent in financial transactions in 2024-25; and a budget in 2023-24 that is worth nearly 5 per cent less than when it was set.

That brings us to what we in the chamber can do. We may be in the midst of an election campaign, but it will not be long—I do not know whether this is good or bad news to members—before our attention turns to the next Scottish Government budget round. We are now a minority Government, and when it comes to the asks from

parties on all sides of the chamber regarding how we wish to spend money, our door will absolutely be open, but those discussions will also need to be about where that money comes from.

We always say that, every year, but, in a minority Government situation, the ability of every party to have a genuine impact on the budget is real. Nevertheless, parties must come forward with costed proposals for that spend.

Miles Briggs: One of the hardest things—the cabinet secretary knows about these concerns of mine—is not having access to officials in order to look at the data that the Government has. All of a sudden, money can be found by ministers—in the past, that has usually been to keep the Greens on board. Would the cabinet secretary agree that civil servants should be made available to all parties in the Parliament to discuss all the moneys to which Government has access?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: All the ministers in the Government would absolutely welcome the opportunity to sit down with Miles Briggs and other members, alongside our officials, to discuss the difficult choices that have to be made. With every request for more money—as Scottish Green colleagues will know—come difficult decisions, and every party now has to face up to that. If we are looking for consensus that leads to action, that requires action from not just the Government but other parties as well.

A number of members mentioned the comments from the Poverty and Inequality Commission, and they were right to do so. The commission raises a challenge—again, it is not just for the Government but for all of us—as to how we can work in a cross-party agreement with civil society to develop a strategy for child poverty targets. The commission is right to do that, and I welcome the opportunity for us to take forward work with the commission to see how that can be done.

The commission has also challenged Government—again, however, we are a minority Government, so it is a challenge for us all—on how we should reprioritise funding to ensure that the necessary resources are made available to deliver both existing commitments and future actions. We absolutely stand ready for that challenge, and I ask members on all sides of the chamber to do so, too.

I turn briefly to some of the comments from members during the debate. Maggie Chapman, as always, gave a thoughtful speech. I highlight in particular her closing remarks on how we must look to tackle child poverty and the climate crisis, as those are not mutually exclusive but shared endeavours. Once again, I give a firm commitment to a human rights act. The Government remains committed to a strong human rights act for

Scotland. As we are currently in a pre-election period, we are limited in what we can say on those issues, but I look forward to carrying on my discussions with Maggie Chapman on the matter at some point.

Beatrice Wishart raised an important point about the link between gender inequality and poverty; she was right to do so, and I take that issue very seriously. Alex Rowley mention the roles of local government, the Scottish Government and the UK Government. Again, he was right to point to what we must do at all levels of government, and how we can all rise to that challenge.

I say to Mr Rowley, and to other colleagues, that the invitation to meet with ministers to discuss solutions is not only for the spokespeople on the front benches but for all those members with good ideas. My door is always open to my fellow Fifer, if he wishes to discuss issues around child poverty, although non-Fifers are allowed meetings to discuss these matters, too.

Mr Rowley also raised the issue—as members on the Labour benches have done in the past—of what Labour has done. Labour members are right to highlight that, but I pose a challenge to them. The system of tax credits, for example, is currently being dismantled by the current Tory Government, because whatever Labour can sometimes give, the Tories will take away in the next Government that they form. There is, therefore, a danger in depending on a Labour Government for solutions. Even if Labour lives up to expectations in meeting its commitments—although some of us may question where it currently is on some of those—whatever it puts in place can certainly be taken away when the next Tory Government comes along.

Emma Roddick gave a powerful speech, as always, on the impact of homelessness. Paul McLennan has already reached out—as members will know, he is probably the most approachable minister in Government—to suggest a meeting, and we look forward to working with my colleague Miss Roddick on the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

The Government remains absolutely committed to our child poverty targets. From what we have heard today, I think and I hope that the whole Parliament does as well. That is why it is important that we work together on that endeavour across Government, not just in social justice, but, as colleagues have challenged us to do, in health and education—indeed, right across Government and all cabinet secretaries' portfolios.

We must also work together across the chamber and across Scotland, at all different levels of government, including the UK Government, the Scottish Government and our local authorities. If we do so—if we rise to that challenge and if we

genuinely work together to look for solutions—we can eradicate child poverty once and for all. Surely, that is what we all got into politics for.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
That concludes the debate on Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty.

Business Motion

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-13579, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Wednesday 12 June 2024—

delete

7.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.15 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 13 June 2024—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

2.45 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

2.15 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

followed by Ministerial Statement: European
Structural and Investment Funds—
[Jamie Hepburn]

Motion agreed to.

Motion without Notice

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.56 pm.—[Jamie Hepburn]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-13566.3, in the name of Douglas Ross, which seeks to amend motion S6M-13566, in the name of John Swinney, on Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:56

Meeting suspended.

17:00

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-13566.3, in the name of Douglas Ross. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 27, Against 87, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-13566.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-13566, in the name of John Swinney, on Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)

Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 21, Against 93, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-13566, in the name of John Swinney, on Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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

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

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote
 cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 27, Abstentions 24.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that eradicating child poverty is a national mission for the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and society; welcomes the progress made in delivering the Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026, with spend benefiting children in low-income households increasing to an estimated £1.4 billion in 2023; recognises the balance of action required across the three drivers of poverty reduction, which are income from employment, the cost of living and income from social security, as well as the need to drive improvements in wellbeing and outcomes for children and families; warns of the threat that UK Government austerity poses to the action and ambition of the Scottish Government in eradicating child poverty; notes modelling that estimates that 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty in the current year as a result of Scottish Government policies; further notes modelling that estimates that a further 40,000 children in Scotland could be lifted out of poverty were the UK Government to make key changes to social security, including by introducing an Essentials Guarantee and abolishing the two-child limit, and calls on the incoming UK administration to work collaboratively with the Scottish Government and to follow Scotland's lead in taking ambitious anti-poverty action.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Our final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12891, in the name of Neil Bibby, on proposed cuts to Renfrewshire health and social care partnership services.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes reports that Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) faces a £14.7 million budget blackhole as a result of Scottish Government underfunding and has proposed significant cuts to its local services, including in the West of Scotland region; recognises what it sees as the widespread concern amongst service users and families about the reported proposal to close Montrose Care Home, merge Mirin and Milldale Day Centres as well as withdraw funding for the Renfrewshire Head Injuries Service; believes that Montrose Care Home in Paisley is an excellent and vital public sector care home; further believes that the Mirin and Milldale day centres provide a lifeline service for hundreds of adults with learning disabilities and that the Quarries Renfrewshire Head Injuries Service provides invaluable support to over 80 users with complex and life-altering conditions; understands that serious concerns have been raised regarding the extent to which the consultations for these decisions have followed the proper processes and impact that they will have on hundreds of local families, including the workers, in Renfrewshire, and notes the belief that every effort should be made by the Scottish Government, Renfrewshire Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to reverse these proposals.

17:07

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to have this debate today. I would normally say that it is a pleasure, but I take no pleasure in having to talk about devastating cuts to health and social care in Renfrewshire. I thank my Scottish Labour MSP colleagues, and Russell Findlay, who supported the motion calling for a stop to the cuts, which, notably, did not receive any support from a single Scottish National Party MSP representing Renfrewshire or anywhere else in Scotland, despite the significant impact that the cuts and closures will have.

This week is carers week and, no doubt, the Scottish Government will say warm words about it, but the reality is that the cuts will add more pressure and will withdraw support from service users, their carers and their families. I thank those who have taken the time and made the effort to come through from Renfrewshire to the Parliament today.

Renfrewshire health and social care partnership has had to put forward a series of cuts to plug a near-£15 million financial black hole because of years of Scottish Government underfunding. Those cuts are not mere financial adjustments;

they are life-altering blows to the most vulnerable members of our community. Like many people across Renfrewshire, I was relieved at the last-minute reversal on the decision to merge Mirin and Milldale day care centres for adults with learning disabilities. That U-turn is a direct result of the powerful and relentless campaigning by countless service users and their families, supported in particular by Councillor Iain McMillan, who is in the gallery today, along with Councillor Janis McDonald. Those campaigners are an inspiration, and I was proud to stand alongside them and stand up for them, but it should never have come to that point. The fact that the most vulnerable people in our community were forced to campaign outside Renfrewshire Council buildings in the freezing cold and torrential rain to save their lifeline services was disgraceful.

That is where the welcome news ends. Despite the best efforts of campaigners, Montrose care home in Paisley is set to close its doors, despite 3,000 people signing a petition against its closure. Montrose is an excellent public sector care home and it has been a highly valued sanctuary for the residents who have come to depend on it.

My constituent Jacqueline told me:

“Both my mother and aunt were residents in Montrose Care Home. Both had dementia, although different forms and with different symptoms. All of our family have nothing but respect for the service, and the friendly and well qualified staff. The members of the HSCP Board who voted to end this fantastic service have let Renfrewshire down badly. They should be ashamed.”

The 31 remaining residents and the staff who care for them now face an uncertain future and could face huge disruption. One resident moved to Montrose care home after facing the devastation of having all four of his limbs amputated as a result of sepsis. His home, where he lived with his wife and two daughters, became inaccessible to him, and he was unable to secure adequate support from the council to redevelop his garage into a living space, which would have allowed him to remain there. He had to turn to crowdfunding to raise the funds that he needed to carry out the necessary adaptations at his home. He has now been served with a legal notice to quit the care home despite the works at his family home not yet having begun. That will be an awful, unthinkable and truly stressful situation for my constituent to be in, but it is being compounded by the disgraceful decision to close the care home.

Given the rise in the elderly population and the rise in dementia in Renfrewshire, the HSCP should be expanding the number of public sector care homes, not leaving the vulnerable elderly and their families to the vagaries of the private sector. The closure represents the dismantling of public sector care homes on the SNP's watch.

The Renfrewshire head injury service as we know it is also facing closure. Local campaigners took their fight to the health and social care partnership, forcing it to revisit its budget and roll back on its decision to scrap the service completely. The existing service will still close, and it will be replaced by a yet-to-be-defined new service, backed by a much smaller funding pot. That closure took place last week but, despite the new funding offer, families have been left in the dark about when the new service will be up and running, whether it will be able to meet the complex needs of their loved ones and what they should do while there remains a gap in provision. In the meantime, highly qualified, skilled staff, who have provided consistency for service users, have been lost. The service has been a lifeline for individuals recovering from traumatic head injuries.

My constituent Jed, who is in the public gallery, told me earlier that, if it was not for that service, he would not be here. Replacing it with a drastically underfunded alternative is not just a cutback—it is a betrayal. It sends a clear message that the SNP sees the wellbeing of these individuals as expendable.

I have also spoken to another service user, David. The service offered David and his family a range of support, including opportunities to socialise and a comfortable environment where no one had to explain their moods or behaviours. It provided consistency for those who needed it. The head injury service is an excellent service, which has helped David and many others to develop, grow and build confidence. The prospect of losing it has led David to say that he feels “written off” and “abandoned”. Many families are worried about how they will cope without such clubs and services.

Let us be clear: those are not abstract figures on a balance sheet. They are real people, with real needs, who are being pushed to the margins—and many of them are here today. The SNP claims that it wants to protect health and social care services, but the reality in Renfrewshire is cuts to vital services for our most vulnerable people. The SNP says that it is against privatisation of services, but the reality in Renfrewshire is that more and more people are having to go private as the council closes excellent public sector care homes and services.

Actions speak louder than words. The cuts are not inevitable. SNP councillors on the integration joint board, SNP MSPs who represent Renfrewshire and the SNP Government cannot shirk responsibility. I understand that there is a meeting of the leadership board of Renfrewshire Council next week, with the closures on the agenda. I hope, for the sake of those in the gallery

and those watching at home today, that the decisions will be reversed, and that the Scottish Government will intervene to stop the cuts from happening, because that is what my constituents are calling for.

Enough is enough. Health and social care services are not luxuries; they are fundamental. The cuts are ill thought out and cruel. They may balance budgets in the short term, but they will cost us dearly—much more—in the long run. The health and wellbeing of our community is not negotiable, and it is time for the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and Renfrewshire health and social care partnership to do something about it.

17:15

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank Neil Bibby for bringing this important debate to the chamber. At the outset, I stress that I agree with a lot of what he said about the importance of these services throughout Scotland.

I will focus my remarks on health and social care partnerships generally, as the issue that Mr Bibby highlighted is clearly very local. I apologise to him as, until I heard him speak, I was unaware of the detail and the background that led him to lodge the motion.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Rona Mackay: No, thank you—I have just started.

Although, as I said, this matter reflects the particular issues facing Renfrewshire Council, I understand that local authorities throughout Scotland, and in England, are facing similar challenges in social care. That includes my own local authority, East Dunbartonshire Council.

This morning, I watched an excellent evidence session at the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee on HSCPs, and heard an informative discussion around self-directed support. David Aitken, who is head of adult services on East Dunbartonshire integration joint board, gave an excellent account of the initiatives and planning in his department that go into making the everyday decisions that affect the lives of so many vulnerable people who need support. All our local authorities do an outstanding job in that respect.

Having “a £14.7 million budget blackhole” is extremely difficult, to say the least, and hard choices have to be made. Many local authorities throughout the country, including my own, are having to make such choices. Nevertheless, I point out to Mr Bibby—I think that he is well aware of this point—that the Scottish Government budget

has been cut in real terms by 1.2 per cent since 2022-23, and the UK Government has held back £13 billion that was due to come to us. In that regard, it is difficult to see how to avoid cuts, but that is, of course, very much down to individual decisions by local authorities.

This afternoon, during a debate in the chamber highlighting the First Minister’s priority of eradicating child poverty—which is responsible for so many health issues that dog people from childhood to adulthood—Paul O’Kane admitted that there was a UK context to the current situation. The First Minister spoke of his hope that an incoming Labour Government would help in our bid to eradicate poverty. Abolishing the two-child cap and the benefits cap would—and should—be a start, although much more could be done with the correct political will and priorities. Our Scottish child payment is transformational, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. We introduced that benefit, which is not available anywhere else in the UK, in the context of having to mitigate Westminster cuts in the face of a shrinking budget.

To return to Neil Bibby’s motion, the cuts that are being proposed in Renfrewshire would have a terrible impact on those who rely on those services. Neil Bibby articulated that very well, and I can only agree with him. Care homes and day centres are the mainstay for so many vulnerable people, and they often provide a lifeline. I sincerely hope that some other way of saving them can be found, perhaps through the use of reserves, although I clearly have no background information on the council’s finances in that regard.

In conclusion, I genuinely hope—as, I am sure that, more than anyone, the people who are sitting in the public gallery hope—that a solution can be found, and I thank Neil Bibby for shining a light on the matter in the chamber today.

17:18

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): This debate is about vital, and excellent, public services in Renfrewshire: Montrose care home, the Mirin and Milldale day centres and the Renfrewshire head injury service.

As Neil Bibby pointed out, Renfrewshire health and social care partnership has a £15 million “blackhole” to fill—that is the absolutely appropriate term that he used to describe the situation. Of course, as Rona Mackay said, the HSCP faces hard choices.

A few months back, when the matter was first brought to my attention, I was fortunate enough to meet a group of Milldale mums. Those ladies were determined that the service on which they and their loved ones rely would not close its doors, as it had been proposed that the service should be

merged with a similar service nearby. Their action resulted in what they thought at the time was a victory. They worked with one of my council colleagues, David McGonigle, and they believed that they had won an undertaking from the partnership that the service would be saved. Unfortunately, as Neil Bibby's motion suggests, the proposal is back in play and the services are at risk again. I know that those women will be absolutely devastated.

Today, I was fortunate enough to meet the dedicated staff of many of the services involved, including Montrose care home, and service users. Bare words in a motion, no matter how good the motion is, cannot possibly convey the human cost of those services closing or being downgraded or merged, nor the value that they bring to families and individuals. People rely on those services—we may think, “There but for the grace of God,” as none of us would wish the situation on anyone. Without that provision, those people would be living very different lives.

When I met the staff today I was struck by the pride that they take in transforming lives. The services change lives for the better, and the staff—who work behind closed doors, so the public rarely see that work—take great pride in that.

The entire process has caused a massive amount of anxiety and uncertainty for service users and their families. A theme that seems to be common in such situations is the consultation process. I hear from people all the time that consultation feels like little more than a bit of a sham; it is quite a cynical exercise. I have heard that repeated again today.

Ultimately, if the closures go ahead, it will be a false economy. It will take money out of the economy, as families who currently rely on those services must become full-time carers as they will be unable to work. In addition, it will diminish hugely the quality of life for people across society who otherwise thrive in such environments.

I have no doubt that the minister will talk a lot about financial constraints—Rona Mackay has already mentioned that aspect—but it is important to get on the record some hard facts about the financial reality. The Scottish Government is in receipt of the largest block grant on record—it is £43 billion for 2024-25. The Fraser of Allander Institute, which is a respected organisation, describes it as the highest in real terms since 2009-10.

This is not, therefore, an issue that the SNP can blame its usual Westminster bogeyman for, as it does for everything; service users will not be interested in those excuses. It is about choices that the Scottish Government has made. What this

Government, or Renfrewshire health and social care partnership, is proposing is not inevitable.

I close by telling members what one of the service users said to me this afternoon. I asked him, “What would you say to the Government?” His message to the minister was, “Put yourself in our shoes.” I urge the minister to do so and to make every effort to save these critical lifeline services.

17:23

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank my colleague Neil Bibby for lodging the motion and securing the debate, and for his eloquent opening speech, in which he laid out in detail the challenges that exist and warmly paid tribute to all who have been involved in the campaigns to protect the services.

I say to Rona Mackay—I would have said this earlier, had she accepted my intervention—that, although she made a valiant attempt to defend the Government’s position, it is disappointing that there is no local knowledge of the matter from members on the Government benches. The local SNP members for Paisley, Renfrewshire North and West and Renfrewshire South are not in the chamber this evening to contribute or to hear the debate, and that is very regrettable indeed.

I declare an interest, as I was an employee of Enable Scotland until I was elected to Parliament in 2021. I mention that not only because it is right to do so but because, in preparing for the debate, I have been thinking about many of the experiences that I had when I was working there and supporting people who have learning disabilities and their families. All too often, it is the most vulnerable people in society who have borne the brunt of decisions such as the one that we are debating today.

In the case of the campaign to save Milldale and Mirin day centres, like my colleagues Neil Bibby and Russell Findlay, I had the opportunity to spend time with many of the parents and carers and, indeed, with service users. The meeting that I attended, in Renfrewshire carers centre, was on a Monday morning. I am sure that everyone will know that a Monday morning meeting can often take a while to get going, but that was absolutely not the case in this situation. They are a fiercely passionate, dedicated and inspiring group of people, who are making the case for their children to have choice and control over the lives that they lead.

The group wanted to speak to me about that because, as we have heard reflected already, they felt that although we often talk in council chambers or in Parliament about choice and control and people having the freedom to choose how they

live their lives, the reality is often very different and is driven by financial decisions—and by the cuts agenda, which is under way across Renfrewshire. They spoke to me with righteous anger about their feeling that there had been a lack of consultation with people who have learning disabilities and their families during the process. Many of them felt that their views had been disregarded. I think that it was Russell Findlay who said that they felt that lip service had been paid to their views.

What is clear tonight is the tenacity of campaigners across Renfrewshire who have a stake in the services or who either attend them or have a family member who does. It is their tenacity that is making decision makers sit up, think again and take stock. Everybody who has spoken tonight and has signed the motion is standing beside them—not least my colleague Neil Bibby, as can be seen by all the work that he has done in the campaign.

All of that is about a wider issue as well. Too many people with learning disabilities or physical disabilities and their carers say that everything in their life is a battle and has to be fought for, and that nothing is ever straightforward. The motion rightly points to the other experiences of those at Montrose care home and at the Quarriers Renfrewshire head injury service. Many of the people in the gallery would have similar experiences of everything being a battle. We have to acknowledge that.

We must also acknowledge that the decisions that we make and that are made in HSCPs are directly impacting on people's lives. We know from what we have heard already and from the motion that it is not always in the hands of local decision makers to be free to make the choices that they want to make, because of the cuts that are passed down to them by the Scottish Government and the £14.7 million black hole that has been created by underfunding in Renfrewshire.

We must stand with the families and listen to what they have to say. We must also listen to the people who use the services. I call on the Government, in its response to the debate, to tell us how it will support and stand with those families in Renfrewshire to ensure that those vital services can be protected for the future. [*Applause.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but I ask people in the gallery not to clap, please. You are very welcome to attend our proceedings, but we are involved in a debate.

17:28

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank members for their contributions, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to close the debate. I thank

the individuals involved in the delivery of health and care services in Renfrewshire, the services mentioned by name in today's debate and the many more that have not been mentioned. I am acutely aware of, and want to acknowledge, just how much hard work and expertise are involved in providing excellent services locally.

The Scottish Government continues to provide record funding for the health and social care portfolio, with more than £19.5 billion allocated for 2024-25. That figure includes more than £2 billion for social care and integration, delivering on our programme for government commitment to increase social care spending by 25 per cent over this session of Parliament, two years ahead of our original target.

Far from underfunding the sector, as Neil Bibby's motion implies, that uplift exceeds the front-line Barnett consequential that were passed on from the United Kingdom Government. I also note that the Scottish Government has increased the resources that are available to local government by £574.6 million in 2024-25, which is a real-terms increase of 2.5 per cent.

Let me be clear: it is for local partners to agree a budget that will enable them to meet the needs of local people. These decisions are, therefore, matters for the Renfrewshire integration joint board. Alternatively, in some cases, they are joint decisions to be made between the IJB and Renfrewshire Council.

As Mr Bibby is well aware, it is not appropriate for the Scottish Government to intervene in those local decisions. It is, however, vitally important that those local decisions are made in consultation with the people who use the services, and in full awareness of the impact on those people.

Neil Bibby: The minister is quite right to say that service users should be involved in the process. Service users and their families are in the public gallery today. They do not know what they are going to do without these services, and they are asking the Scottish Government and the minister specifically to intervene to save them. Can the minister outline what the Government will do to help to protect these services?

Maree Todd: I encourage all partners in Renfrewshire to work together to find solutions that will not only address their financial pressures but put the needs of local people at the centre.

With regard to these specific services, I absolutely understand the distress that any planned closure will bring to families and loved ones. This is a really difficult time for them. I understand that the proposal to merge Mirin and Milldale day centres was rejected by the IJB at the end of April, but that Montrose care home is due to

close, and that the contract with Renfrewshire head injury service ended on 7 June.

Again, while I reiterate that those are decisions for the IJB, I have received assurances that staff of the Renfrewshire health and social care partnership have acted in accordance with due process. I am told that they have communicated and consulted with the people who use those services, the residents of care homes and their families and loved ones, and that they have engaged with people who work in the services.

Although the HSCP has a duty to set a balanced budget, no one wants to see the closure of good-quality care services. My officials are actively seeking assurances that alternative arrangements are put in place to support the people of Renfrewshire and that the residents of Montrose house are fully supported during this period.

I am asked regularly to intervene on issues of social care. I remind members in the chamber that we are bringing forward a proposal for a national care service. It was clear in the “Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland” report, and in the consultation on the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, that people in Scotland want ministers to be held accountable for, and to be able to intervene in, these local decisions. I appeal to my colleagues on all sides of the chamber to consider supporting the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, which will give ministers the power that members are looking for.

On funding, I hate politicising over vulnerable people, but there are real challenges with finances as we go forward, and the Labour Party has not committed to progressive taxation. The SNP has committed to progressive taxation and has raised an extra £1.5 billion of additional revenue in the current budget through that. In Scotland, we are committed to spend more per head on health and social care, and we are committed to tax accordingly. The Labour Party is, to be frank, not being clear about its plans for funding public services. In fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that there is a “conspiracy of silence” between the Labour Party and the Tories over their plans for £18 billion of cuts. I believe that voters have a right to know how the Labour Party is planning to fund public services in the future.

Paul O’Kane: I find it very disappointing that the minister has chosen to politicise the issue in the context of the general election in the way that she has done. She mentioned the national care service. Will the national care service as proposed bring a single penny of extra money into front-line health and social care? Does she recognise that there is a serious challenge in supporting and recruiting staff to care jobs, and that her constant refusal to commit to £15 an hour for care workers—a rate which is outlined and supported

by the trade unions, including the GMB, and by the Labour Party—is having a real detrimental impact that is adding to the current pressures?

Maree Todd: I agree with the member that there are currently very serious pressures. I believe in investing in social care, so that it is regarded as an investment rather than a drain on society. That approach will mean that we are able to shift the narrative and put more money into social care.

The Labour Party has plans for £18 billion of cuts across the UK—that is the equivalent of 700,000 social care workers. Labour needs to be honest with the electorate about its plans for cutting public services.

Before I conclude, I reflect that today’s debate makes it absolutely clear, and illustrates precisely, why we need a national care service. The national care service will improve quality, fairness and consistency of provision in a way that meets the needs of individuals across Scotland. It will provide a critical opportunity to increase our focus on prevention and early intervention, and to ensure that social care support is human rights based and outcomes focused.

In closing, I thank members again for their contributions to the debate. The landscape is undoubtedly challenging—on that we can all agree. That is why the Government has chosen consistently to invest significant sums to support our health and social care system. I reiterate the vital role that is played by the many individuals who are involved in delivering quality health and care services, and I urge all the partners in Renfrewshire to continue to work together to find solutions that put the needs of local people, in particular those who are most vulnerable, front and centre.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:37.

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