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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 13 June 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon—or, actually, good morning. [Laughter.] The first item of business is general questions.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health (Admissions)

1. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will end the reported practice of children and young people being admitted to adult services for treatment, rather than a national health service specialist child and adolescent mental health ward. (S6O-03573)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We expect children and young people who require in-patient mental health care to be looked after in age-appropriate facilities. We have three regional young person units providing specialist support to young people from across Scotland, as well as a national child psychiatric in-patient unit.

Very occasionally a young person will be admitted to an adult ward—for example, where they require admission to an intensive psychiatric care unit and cannot be safely cared for in an open adolescent unit. Admission will be for the shortest possible time and under strict conditions, including supervision from child and adolescent mental health service clinicians and following the guidance on admission to adult mental health wards for under-18s.

Miles Briggs: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I recently held a round-table meeting in the Parliament, when I welcomed Jane and Dave Macdonnell, who told MSPs about the experience of their son, Harris. I thank the MSPs who attended that meeting, at which the Macdonnells bravely read out Harris's essay, "Escape", which captured his time being held in an adult service.

Harris said:

"When I became unwell, I was admitted to Huntlyburn Adult Psychiatric Unit, because there were no beds in Scotland available in any Young Person's Unit. No other young person should have to go through the experience I had.

It was the wrong place for someone who was already mixed up, frightened and unsure of who they were. The environment heightened my anxiety. After treatment for my

injuries I was cared for in the Young Person's Unit in Edinburgh for 2 months and I began my recovery."

Harris Macdonnell tragically took his own life in 2020.

I welcome the meeting that I recently managed to secure with Maree Todd. The family have had meetings with her, too. I also welcome the news of the fatal accident inquiry that is now to take place regarding Harris's case.

However, the scandal of children and young people still being admitted to adult services has to end. It has gone on for too long. Will the Scottish Government now act and agree to introduce a ban on children and young people being admitted to adult services?

Neil Gray: I thank Miles Briggs for his work in representing the Macdonnell family, to whom I pass my sincere condolences, and I pay tribute to the incredible work that they are doing through the Harris Trust, in Harris's memory. I also pay tribute to Miles Briggs for the work that he has done, including the meeting that he held with my colleague Maree Todd.

Of course, such circumstances are horrendous for any family to deal with, and we will keep working to ensure that they are avoided. To enhance future provision, we are providing funding to boards to develop regional adolescent intensive psychiatric care units. We currently have 54 CAMHS in-patient beds across Scotland for children and adolescents, in the Dudhope young people's unit, the Melville unit and Skye house. Those units admit children and young people from their health board regions, with the flexibility to admit from other regions if the unit closest to a child or young person is full.

I will, of course, take on board the ask that Miles Briggs has raised, but I return to the point that I made in my opening reply, which was that, in some circumstances—I hope that they are rare circumstances—it is necessary to ensure safe delivery of care for children and young people. Sometimes they need to be seen in adult services, but that must be done following the guidance that I mentioned, while ensuring that it is avoided, wherever possible.

Empty Homes Officers (Funding)

2. **Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider increasing funding for empty homes officers, in light of the First Minister's reported statement that empty homes are key to tackling the housing emergency. (S6O-03574)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Since 2010, we have invested over £800,000 to embed empty homes officers within councils

through funding for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Ariane Burgess rightly highlights the effectiveness of our approach, as endorsed by the independent audit last year, with 9,000 homes being brought back into use.

Although it is for councils to determine how to deploy their resources to best effect, the audit recognised the critical role that officers play in unlocking barriers, particularly with private owners. They are an essential component of the partnership's co-produced strategic empty homes framework approach to maximising the impact across local authority housing services. We recently updated guidance to councils about utilising the ring-fenced revenue that they derive from the council tax on second and empty homes to fund more officers.

Ariane Burgess: In Tiree, a constituent was recently on the brink of leaving the island, where her family work and volunteer, because they could not find a home to rent. Thirty-six per cent of homes in Tiree do not meet local needs because they are holiday lets or empty homes. Argyll and Bute Council and Tiree Community Development Trust are working hard with the resources that they have to address that, but many people across the Highlands and Islands still cannot find or afford a decent home in the community in which they want to live. What more is the Scottish Government doing to get empty properties back into use as homes for people who need them?

Paul McLennan: I met housing associations and development trusts in Argyll and Bute with the local member about a month ago to discuss that particular point. It is up to the local authority how it uses its funds on empty homes officers. However, there is a real role for development trusts, as well. I would be happy to meet Ariane Burgess to discuss that further, because their role is essential.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Last month, the Scottish Government declared a housing emergency, with tens of thousands of people struggling to find suitable accommodation. However, the latest Scottish Government figures show that the number of long-term-empty properties has increased by 4 per cent, to more than 46,000, in a year. The Scottish Conservatives, as well as charities including Crisis, have called for the creation of a fund that would allow councils to convert such properties into affordable housing. Does the Scottish Government intend to introduce such a fund?

Paul McLennan: I mentioned our investment. We have invested £3.7 million in the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership since 2010, and we have brought back 9,000 homes since 2010. I know that the Scottish Tories previously announced that they wanted to spend £255 million

to bring back 7,400 homes. Our approach demonstrates that it is the best way to proceed.

I meet local authorities and discuss those particular points. We are always encouraging local authorities to take on more empty homes partnerships, but it is up to them. Only this morning, I met the City of Edinburgh Council—which is taking on more empty homes partnerships—to discuss that point. Again, I am happy to discuss the issue with Ariane Burgess.

NHS Lothian and NHS Borders (Finances)

3. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Lothian and NHS Borders regarding financial stability in the 2024-25 financial year. (S6O-03575)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Despite our significant investment in 2024-25, with an increase of over half a billion pounds, which presents a real-terms uplift to front-line boards, the system remains under extreme pressure as a result of the on-going impacts of Covid, Brexit, inflation and United Kingdom Government spending decisions.

The Scottish Government's financial delivery unit works closely with all boards, including NHS Lothian and NHS Borders, as part of the financial planning process. The Scottish Government has met NHS Lothian and NHS Borders on multiple occasions to develop and implement 2024-25 financial plans this year. Quarter 1 reviews will be held in the coming months to assess their current financial performance.

Craig Hoy: Mr Gray is aware that both health boards face a bleak financial future as a result of the Scottish National Party's misplaced financial priorities. The decisions that they are now taking are causing real concerns to national health service staff and worried patients. In the Scottish Borders, 92 essential community hospital beds, including in Kelso, Hawick, Duns and Peebles, are at risk. In East Lothian, the Edington and Belhaven hospitals, the Abbey residential care home and Blossom house residential care home have been summarily closed without any consultation. To top it all, general practitioners in East Lothian face massive increases in facilities management fees.

Despite the Scottish Government being the root cause of those problems, it is passing the buck. Michael Taylor of the primary care directorate recently wrote to me to say that, although the Scottish Government had a national approach to the issue of facilities management fees, it was for boards to agree

"any fair and equitable approach".

Is it not time for the Scottish Government to step in, properly fund boards, and halt those damaging charges and closures?

Neil Gray: There is, of course, a hint of irony in Craig Hoy's question about the financial stability of our health boards, because our decisions to have a more progressive form of taxation, which means that we have raised £1.5 billion more for public services here in Scotland, were opposed by the Scottish Conservatives.

The allocation to the national health service of the Barnett consequentials that came from the spring budget was also opposed by the Scottish Conservatives. They wanted us to divert that money to business tax relief and are well entitled to do so, but if they had had their way, it would have led to an even worse situation for our health boards because of the financial challenges that they face.

Regarding the situation that is faced by general practices, I, of course, greatly value the work that they do, but it is for boards to come forward and resolve the situation. We invested more than £1.2 billion in general medical services in 2023-24 and are fully committed to increasing the number of GPs in Scotland to ensure that more people get the right care in the right place at the right time. We have a record number of GPs in training and have a head count that includes 271 more GPs in Scotland as a result of our actions. We will keep supporting their work in primary care, which is the bedrock of our health service.

The Presiding Officer: I am going to call Sarah Boyack for a brief supplementary question. Before I do so, I remind all members that the length of questions and responses in this session means that it will be impossible for me to get in all members who wish to contribute.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): With 84 per cent of Scotland's future population growth expected to be in the Lothians, NHS Lothian is in desperate need of investment, but our health board is already having to make a 6 per cent saving by cutting vital services, including diabetes technology. Yesterday, in a meeting with the cabinet secretary, the campaign group KEEP—keep Edinburgh eye pavilion—reinforced the urgent need for investment in a new eye pavilion. What will the Scottish Government do now to ensure that our health board has the funding to cope with substantial increases in our population now and in the future?

Neil Gray: As I outlined to Craig Hoy, we have passed on a real-terms increase to our front-line boards so that they can respond to the challenges that they face following Covid, Brexit, inflation and the UK cost of living crisis. I recognise that there are challenges despite the 3 per cent real-terms

increase, which we have delivered in the face of a falling block grant from Westminster. We have increased the budget for Lothian by £82.2 million this year, but I recognise the challenges that persist.

Sarah Boyack asked about the eye pavilion, but we are in an even more acute situation with capital because of the £1.3 billion cut by the UK Government to our capital budget. It is incumbent on colleagues across the chamber to ensure that they lobby the UK Government—of whichever colour comes next—to invest properly in the health service, rather than continuing the austerity that is currently on offer from both parties.

Housing Standards (Letterboxes)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Communication Workers Union's call for housing standards to be updated to ensure that letterboxes are positioned at a suitably accessible height. (S6O-03576)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Government is aware of the Communication Workers Union's long-standing campaign highlighting the health and safety issues that low-level letterboxes present to its members. I recognise the benefits that addressing the issue would have for its members and, more generally, for the accessibility and safety of homes.

Officials are engaging with the CWU and are assessing the options for amendment to building standards guidance, subject to further engagement with industry stakeholders. That amendment would provide more explicit guidance about the positioning of the letterboxes provided in new dwellings.

Stuart McMillan: I have been working with the CWU's national health and safety officer for more than a year on the issue of low-level letterboxes and have also been in dialogue with Scottish Government officials. I am told that there are no objections to banning low-level letterboxes in future developments or in door replacements, because that would benefit postal workers by reducing the risk of injury. Will the minister outline the steps that the Scottish Government has taken to implement that policy?

Paul McLennan: I am committed to reviewing the building standards guidance regarding low-level letterboxes and am working with stakeholders, prior to any change to building standards guidance, to confirm that there will be no unintended consequences. Officials will continue engaging with the CWU and with wider industry stakeholders to assess the options for amending building standards guidance. I reassure

the member that updates to the guidance will follow that process as soon as is possible.

General Practitioner Numbers

5. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to increase the number of GPs. (S6O-03577)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Let me be clear: GPs are highly valued in our national health service, and I thank them for their tireless work supporting patients in our communities.

I remain fully committed to increasing the number of GPs in Scotland by 800, by 2027. The GP head count has increased by 271 since 2017 and it is consistently more than 5,000. Training new GPs is key and we have expanded GP specialty training, adding 35 places this academic year and 35 places next year. There are currently more than 1,200 trainee GPs in Scotland, which is a record, and we have invested more than £1 million into a range of recruitment and retention initiatives.

Kenneth Gibson: Will the cabinet secretary advise members how GP numbers in Scotland compare with those in other parts of the United Kingdom? Given that concerns have been raised by constituents about the time that it takes to obtain an appointment, how much have the numbers of patients presenting at GP surgeries risen since the pandemic? What work is being undertaken with surgeries to improve the efficiency of their appointment systems?

Neil Gray: Kenneth Gibson is correct that we have a far higher number of GPs per head of population in Scotland than is present in England and Wales, but we are not complacent about that situation. That is why we are investing in the GP training programmes, as well as the recruitment and retention work that I described. We are also ensuring that there is equity of access between urban and rural areas, which is why the Scottish graduate entry medicine programme is so important, as well as the rural fellowship programme.

We know that 90 per cent of all health service interactions are in primary care, and that the complexity of the needs of patients who are arriving at GP practices has increased, post pandemic. That means that the length of time for which GPs need to see their patients has increased, putting great pressure on those services, which is why we continue to invest in multidisciplinary teams to provide the capacity and support that primary care practitioners need.

Anti-poverty Work

6. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work to tackle poverty, in the light of recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showing that 86 per cent of low-income households receiving universal credit were going without the essentials and that nearly 1 million people in the United Kingdom are “only £10 a week away from poverty”. (S6O-03578)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Despite facing the most challenging budget settlement since devolution, we are committing more than £3 billion this year to policies that tackle poverty and protect people, as far as possible, during the on-going cost of living crisis. That includes investment in our game-changing Scottish child payment and into early learning and childcare, as well as providing free bus travel for more than 2 million people.

Our action is making a difference, with modelling estimating that our policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Of course, we could go so much further, if Westminster matched Scotland’s ambition, with policies towards eradicating child poverty such as introducing an essentials guarantee and abolishing the two-child limit.

Collette Stevenson: With austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis, those figures are a shocking indictment of 14 years of Tory rule. The Resolution Foundation warns that the Tory’s manifesto plans would slash welfare by another £12 billion. Will the cabinet secretary outline what she will discuss with her UK Government counterpart after the election, given that the key powers are reserved to Westminster? Does she agree that it would be better if the Scottish Government could invest more in its own anti-poverty policies, rather than having to mitigate the cuts from cruel Westminster policies such as the bedroom tax?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Collette Stevenson is right to point out that there is money that the Scottish Government has to invest in our people because we have to mitigate the effect of welfare cuts. Currently, we invest £134 million to mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. It certainly appears that, regardless of who wins the next UK election and who is in number 10, those mitigations will have to remain in place, because no changes will be made. We would like to go further on the issue, but it is difficult to see how we can do that when, despite the promises that have been made, no new funding for anti-poverty measures is coming from either party.

The Presiding Officer: I will take question 7, if members are brief.

RAAC (Aberdeen City Council)

7. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with Aberdeen City Council in relation to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6O-03579)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Scottish Government officials met Aberdeen City Council officers on 4 June to discuss the council's progress on its planned rehoming programme and its options appraisal for the remediation of properties in which RAAC has been identified in poor condition. I have committed to continuing to engage with council leaders on the issue and plan to meet them over the coming weeks as they continue to make progress on the issue.

Audrey Nicoll: The minister is aware of the significant wellbeing toll that the RAAC situation in my constituency is taking on around 350 households, and I commend council officers for their commitment in supporting tenants as they are rehoused. Similarly, home owners are deeply concerned about the viability of their properties. Many have substantial mortgages and have worked hard to enhance their homes.

The costs that are associated with resolving the matter will be significant. Notwithstanding that the final option is still being assessed, what financial flexibility exists for the Scottish Government and local authorities to work together to identify the most pragmatic possible financial solution?

Paul McLennan: To date, Aberdeen City Council's only specific request for flexibility has been around the temporary use of Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund homes to assist in its planned rehoming project. The Scottish Government worked with the council to accommodate that request. We will be happy to give due consideration to any detailed proposals that come forward, and I am sure that members across the chamber will join me in calling on an incoming United Kingdom Government to deliver a dedicated RAAC fund.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Nathalie Roy MNA, president of the National Assembly of Quebec. [Applause.]

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

National Health Service (Urgent Care)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I begin by wishing Scotland's men's team the very best of luck as they open the Euro 2024 tournament tomorrow night against Germany. The tartan army has travelled in huge numbers to support Steve Clarke and the team, and I know that we will all be cheering them on to success. [Applause.]

This week, during the election debate in Glasgow, Anna McLintock asked John Swinney what he would do to improve Scotland's health service. She spoke about her 93-year-old mother, who needed urgent care but had to wait six hours for an ambulance to arrive and then another two hours outside the hospital before she was admitted. John Swinney did not have answers for Anna on Tuesday, so what does he say to her now, and to so many other people across Scotland who have found themselves in the same situation?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I address the substantive question that Douglas Ross has put to me, I, too, put on record my good wishes to Scotland's men's team, which will play hosts Germany in the opening match of Euro 2024. If I can say so to the Parliament, it is great to see Scotland back in Europe, where we rightly belong.

As First Minister, I wish Steve Clarke's team the best of luck, and I wish the huge numbers of Scotland supporters who are making the journey a safe and memorable trip. I know that the tartan army will be an absolute credit to Scotland, and I know that the team will be a credit to Scotland, because it has inspired so many of us by its success in getting to Euro 2024. I look forward very much to being present to encourage the Scotland team on Friday evening, to ensure their success on Friday night.

Mr Ross has raised a significant issue. In the television debate the other evening, I apologised to Anna McLintock for the experience that her mother had had.

One of the challenges that we face is the volume of demand for health service utilisation in Scotland. There is also a challenge because of the level of delayed discharges from hospitals, which means that our hospitals are operating at very high levels of occupancy.

What we are doing about that is to try to work with local authorities to tackle the issue of delayed discharge. We have had extensive discussions. I,

personally, have had discussions with the leadership of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has followed that up to work to reduce delayed discharges and congestion in our hospitals.

In addition, we are investing in our health service to the extent that we now have record levels of staffing to ensure that we can meet the needs and demands of the population in Scotland.

Although I acknowledge that not everybody is getting the treatment that they require as quickly as they require it, a very focused effort is being undertaken within the Government and our health boards to make sure that that can be delivered in all localities in Scotland.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister has apologised again to Anna McLintock, but many more people like her are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their parents and grandparents. Anna asked the First Minister and other party leaders, “Is our NHS broken?” That is the concern of people up and down Scotland, who cannot get a general practitioner or dentist appointment; who are waiting too long for ambulances or to get into accident and emergency departments; and who need urgent care but cannot get it when they need it. All that those people seem to get from John Swinney and the Scottish National Party are excuses. Do they not deserve to hear the solutions?

The First Minister: I have set out the solutions in my earlier answer to Mr Ross. The Government is very focused on ensuring that the national health service meets the needs of individuals. We all want the NHS to be able to deliver what people require when they require it.

The Government has taken the hard decisions to increase the resources that are available to the NHS. If we had, for example, just passed on the consequential to the health service that were allocated through United Kingdom funding formulas, we would have passed on a lower amount of money than we have actually invested in the national health service. This Government has taken hard decisions about increasing tax on higher earners so that we can allocate more resources to the national health service.

I accept that, even having undertaken that allocation of increased resources, there remain significant strains on the national health service. The point that I made on Tuesday evening—in the discussion in which Mr Ross and I were involved—is that we cannot have, as an outcome of this election, a continuation of the Conservative Government’s austerity, because that would be disastrous for the national health service.

Douglas Ross: The national health service in Scotland has been under the remit of the SNP and John Swinney for 17 years. Another audience member said to Mr Swinney on Tuesday that he should not put the blame elsewhere but should take responsibility. Again, we are getting the same from John Swinney—he is taking no responsibility for Scotland’s NHS. He said that the NHS should meet the needs of individuals, but it is not doing so. It is clear to all of us that it is not meeting the needs of individuals.

Elderly people are routinely left waiting for care in our national health service for far longer than they should be. We have a response to a freedom of information request that shows just how stark the situation is. Patients who are aged over 100 are some of the most vulnerable in our communities. In just over a year, hundreds of them have been made to wait beyond the target treatment time in A and E departments. In more than 100 cases, people aged over 100 have been waiting more than 12 hours for emergency treatment. People who are over 100 are waiting for more than half a day to get emergency treatment in Scotland’s NHS. Those are only the figures for people aged over 100—many more elderly people are waiting in agony, too. John Swinney must surely agree that that is appalling and unacceptable. What is he going to do to fix it?

The First Minister: As I always indicate to Parliament when I am responding to questions, I take responsibility for the actions of my Government and the public services delivered on its behalf—that is my duty as First Minister on all occasions.

I suspect that the situation that Mr Ross recounted is addressed by the fact that our hospitals are operating at such a level of congestion that individuals are not able to be transferred from accident and emergency into wider hospital care for the simple reason that those hospitals are congested because of delayed discharge. That is the explanation of the problem.

The solution to the problem is, as I said in my first answer, to work with local authorities to expand the provision of social care in the community to ensure that we address the delayed discharge issue.

Ultimately, it comes back to the resources that are available to the national health service. I have set out that this Government has taken responsibility for that, because we have been prepared to take the hard decision to increase tax and ensure that more resources have been allocated to the national health service.

Mr Ross would be in a stronger position if he had not argued for me to follow the budget of Liz

Truss. That was what Douglas Ross wanted me to do. He wanted me to follow—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: He wanted me to follow the tax-cutting agenda of Liz Truss. If I had done that, it would have been catastrophic for the country and the national health service, and I am really glad that I did not do it.

Douglas Ross: I would quite like John Swinney to focus on Scotland's NHS and our elderly patients, who are waiting far too long to get the treatment that they deserve. He mentions delayed discharge. The cabinet secretary to his left—Shona Robison—promised to eradicate it seven years ago. Seven years ago, the SNP was going to get rid of delayed discharge altogether, but it is still having a huge impact on our NHS now.

Our FOI query only shows the problems in A and E departments and in ambulance waiting times. However, as we have raised with the SNP many times, there is a crisis at every single level of Scotland's NHS. The number of GP appointments has fallen by 146,000 in the past three years. Over the past 10 years, the number of GP practices has reduced in every single health board across the country. In rural areas, they are shutting at twice the rate of those in urban areas. People across Scotland do not have access to the healthcare that they need and deserve, and that has to change.

We already know what will be line 1 of the SNP's manifesto. How far down John Swinney's list of priorities will Scotland's NHS be?

The First Minister: The NHS is at the top of my list of priorities—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: That is why Scotland has an accident and emergency system that is the best performing in the United Kingdom and has been so for the past nine years—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: That is why the NHS is at the top of my list of priorities. On general practitioners, we have more GPs per head of population in Scotland than any other part of the United Kingdom, which are able to provide care to people in various parts of our country.

On priorities, I say to Douglas Ross that we can tell how Governments act by the resources that they allocate. This Government has taken the tough decision to increase tax on higher earners so that we can invest more in the NHS than was proposed by the Conservative Government in the consequentials. That tells us that the Scottish

Government is giving the necessary priority to the national health service.

Mr Ross asked me about the question of independence, and I will answer his question very directly. Scotland would be in a stronger position to take greater decisions about investment in the NHS if we had the full powers of independence to use the resources of our country to create the best future for our country. I am proud to represent that position.

National Health Service

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I join others in wishing manager Steve Clarke, captain Andy Robertson, vice-captain John McGinn and the entire Scotland men's team all the very best for the Euros. I also wish the tartan army a safe and enjoyable visit to Germany.

Before I was elected, I worked in our national health service as a dentist. Dentistry is just one part of our NHS that is currently in crisis. Earlier this week, I visited a practice in Fife. Much to the frustration of the staff there, the practice cannot take any more NHS patients. In fact, four out of five practices across the country are not accepting new NHS patients, and more and more people are being forced to go private and pay.

The issue does not exist just in dentistry; it is all across our health service, and the problem is growing. The number of people who are being forced to pay for their own care has gone up 86 per cent since 2019 and is at the highest level ever. Labour created our NHS to be free at the point of need. Why does that principle not apply under the Scottish National Party?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the challenges that exist in dental practice, but I point out that Scotland has 57 dentists per 100,000 of the population, compared with 42 per 100,000 in England and 46 per 100,000 in Wales. The investment that the Government has made in the national health service, and particularly in dentistry, has been an important contribution to establishing and achieving that position. That would not have happened had the Government not given that area priority since we came to office in 2007.

The Government has also undertaken a significant intervention through the introduction of a root-and-branch reform of the NHS dental payment system in November last year. We are in the early days of the implementation of that reform package.

Through the combination of the investment in the workforce and the investment in that reform package, the Government is supporting dentistry in Scotland to achieve the necessary delivery of service to people around the country.

Anas Sarwar: I note that the First Minister did not respond to the fact that there is an 86 per cent increase in people having to go for self-payment because of a lack of access to our NHS. Also, the stats that John Swinney quoted will be zero comfort to people who cannot access NHS dentistry and are being forced to go private. I think that he needs to get his head out of the sand.

Labour founded our NHS to be free at the point of need and open to everyone, regardless of the ability to pay. Under the SNP, people again and again are forced to pay because they cannot get treatment in time. Last year, more than 1,500 people in Scotland were forced to pay for knee replacements, at a cost of nearly £16,000 each. There were 8,000 private operations for cataracts, at more than £2,800 each, and almost 3,000 hip replacements, at a cost of more than £14,000 each. In the middle of a cost of living crisis, when mortgages, energy bills and food prices have all gone up, how much have people had to dig into their own savings or borrow from friends and family in order to pay for their own treatment?

The First Minister: I regret the fact that people have felt the need to take recourse to private treatment. I have made it clear in my answers over several weeks that, particularly as a consequence of the increase in case loads because of the cancellation of procedures during the Covid pandemic, the presentation of demand on the national health service has increased. We are working to reduce waiting times and waiting lists to ensure that people get treatment at an earlier time than is the case just now.

I have to say to Anas Sarwar that he is on very thin ground when he challenges me on the question of private involvement in the national health service. I remind him of the comments of Labour's shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, who said that a United Kingdom Labour Government would

"hold the door wide open"

for the private sector in the national health service. He also said:

"We will go further than New Labour ever did. I want the NHS to form partnerships with the private sector that goes beyond just hospitals."

What we have here is a classic example of what Anas Sarwar gets up to in public debate. He comes here and says one thing in Scotland, and in England his bosses are doing a completely different thing, which will have an effect on our budget here in Scotland. Anas Sarwar has already been caught out on that this week. It is not good enough for him to say one thing in Scotland and be contradicted by his bosses in London.

Anas Sarwar: That is, frankly, an embarrassing response to the fact that 3,000 people in Scotland—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: —have had to pay £14,000 for a hip replacement. Mr Swinney wants to do quotes, so I will quote two simple sentences from the UK Labour manifesto, which was published today, as they are a direct response:

"We have saved the NHS before, and the next Labour Government will do so again. With Labour, it will always be publicly owned and publicly funded."

There will not be more people going private, as under the SNP. I will quote another sentence:

"There will be no return to austerity",

so stop the scaremongering, stop the misinformation and be truthful with the people across Scotland—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Anas Sarwar: I asked John Swinney how much people have had to find from their savings or to borrow from friends in order to pay for private treatment, and John Swinney very deliberately failed to answer the question. Let me tell him. Just for hip, knee and cataract surgeries in Scotland last year, people had to pay more than £83 million. That is what families had to find in the middle of a cost of living crisis, because of SNP incompetence. The SNP's mismanagement of our NHS is so bad that it is those who are in pain, sick and injured who are forced to literally pay the price.

Perhaps most horrifyingly of all, there are people who are forced to go private and pay for their cancer treatment. To all the hecklers at the back, I say that that is the reality under the SNP Government. Cancer, Scotland's biggest killer, is something that touches us all—

The Presiding Officer: I must have a question, Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: Every second that is wasted in the fight against cancer decreases the chances of survival—*[Interruption.]*

Heckling cancer patients who must pay private fees—is that the height of the SNP's ambition?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Sarwar, I would be grateful if you could please put a question to the First Minister.

Anas Sarwar: I am coming right now to the question, Presiding Officer.

Last year, more than 1,000 rounds—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Sarwar, I will allow one further opportunity—

Anas Sarwar: This is my question.

The Presiding Officer: I certainly hope that it is.

Anas Sarwar: Last year, more than 1,000 rounds of chemotherapy were paid for privately. Why does the First Minister believe that people in Scotland should have to pay for their life-saving cancer treatment—1,000 rounds—because of his party's failure and incompetence?

The First Minister: I do not want anybody to have to pay for cancer treatment, but I have to face up to the reality of the challenges that our national health service faces.

Let me just give Mr Sarwar a statistic. The rate of people self-funding for private healthcare in England is 66 per cent higher than it is in Scotland—*[Interruption.]* Oh, Jackie Baillie says, "But it is the Tories." Well, we will give Labour-run Wales as a comparison: the rate is 13 per cent higher in Labour-run Wales than it is in SNP-run Scotland, so I say to Jackie Baillie that it is perhaps not a good idea to heckle me when I am in mid-flow.

What that all comes down to is the financial envelope that is available for the national health service. The Government is taking the hard decisions to increase tax in order to improve the amount of money that is invested in the national health service.

There was a day when the Labour Party supported us on that, but now it has deserted the pitch and run away. On orders from London, the Labour Party in Scotland is now voting against higher taxes on higher earners, because its bosses in London have told it to do exactly that. That will undermine the investment in our national health service, which is why Anas Sarwar has not a scrap of credibility when he tells me that there will be "no return to austerity" under a Labour Government. A Labour Government will have to make £20 billion-worth of spending cuts to pick up where the Tories have left off, so it will be continued austerity from Labour, and Scotland should vote against it.

The Presiding Officer: Before I move to the next question, I point out that the length of time that we have taken to reach this point in this item of business is disadvantaging back benchers who wish to put questions to the First Minister. I would be grateful if members could reflect on that.

Oil and Gas (New Licences)

3. **Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** Presiding Officer,

"As clean energy expands and fossil fuel demand declines ... there is no need for investment in new coal, oil and natural gas."

That quote is not from the Scottish Green Party manifesto; it is from the International Energy Agency. This week, the Scottish Government continues to equivocate on new licences for oil and gas. The First Minister's latest position is that the Scottish National Party is okay with new oil and gas if it passes a climate compatibility assessment. How does the First Minister think that any climate compatibility assessment will say that it is okay to drill for new oil when global experts in the energy industry say that it is not?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It has been the Scottish Government's position for a formidable amount of time—it is certainly not something new this week—that climate compatibility assessments have to be undertaken on any particular new oil and gas licence applications. That has been the Scottish Government's position for some considerable time.

The Government's position is that we have got to assess our energy security needs, reduce our emissions in line with our climate commitments and deliver affordable energy supplies. The commitment that I willingly give to Lorna Slater is that the Government recognises the absolute necessity of the journey to net zero, which is why there has to be a climate compatibility assessment on any consideration of oil and gas licensing. That is why I will have no truck with the commitment of the Prime Minister to 100 new oil and gas licences without a question being asked.

Lorna Slater: Our position on the energy transition needs to be evidence based. That evidence does not change on a case-by-case basis. The Scottish Government's position is like a 40-a-day smoker being told by the doctor, "Stop smoking. You're killing yourself," and the smoker replying, "I'll treat each cigarette on a case-by-case basis." That position is not only threatening our environment but putting off investment in the green jobs of the future that our communities so desperately need. When will the Scottish National Party get off the fence, get behind the science on this and admit that Scotland's future relies on green energy and on Scotland's oil staying in the ground?

The First Minister: It might just be me, but I am not sure that the analogy that was conveyed in the question worked particularly well. People would expect their Government to act in an evidence-based fashion. That is exactly what we will do. We will look at the evidence in any individual application, although I point out for factual accuracy that we do not take those decisions. Those decisions are taken by the United Kingdom Government, but we would argue for that consideration. That is why I say that a reckless commitment to 100 new oil and gas licences is just

the territory of climate denier status, and I will go nowhere near that.

A really good volume of investment in green jobs is being undertaken. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy was in Nigg just a few weeks ago at the inauguration of the Sumitomo plant, which has been a fabulous investment in the renewables sector. I was in Ardersier, where there has been a significant investment in green jobs in a project involving the Scottish National Investment Bank and Haventus.

Over the Scottish National Party Government's time in office, we have substantially decarbonised electricity generation in Scotland, whereby, if my memory serves me right, our net electricity generation has gone from 26 per cent to 113 per cent in the most recent data. All of that demonstrates our commitment to renewable energy, which will be absolutely central to the Government's energy strategy when it is published.

UK Economic and Trade Performance

4. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):

To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of any implications for its policy for economic development in Scotland of the findings of the Resolution Foundation's recent report on the United Kingdom's economic and trade performance. (S6F-03239)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The report by the Resolution Foundation highlights that the UK has faced a decade of economic stagnation and low productivity growth. It also shows that the UK's trade openness has declined by 0.7 percentage points since 2019, compared with a 1.2 percentage point rise for G7 countries excluding the United Kingdom. A hard Brexit that Scotland voted to reject has damaged our economy. Scotland is open for business, trade and investment, but actions by the UK Government, such as taking us out of the European Union, and the UK Government's damaging approach to migration, are holding back our economy. Only independence will give Scotland the full range of powers to take economic decisions that are based on our own needs, with the full fiscal and tax levers of a normal independent country.

Jackie Dunbar: The report indicates that the principal driver of economic growth in the UK since 2010 has been immigration. Will the First Minister outline how the conclusions of the Resolution Foundation report feed into the work of the Scottish Government's "Building a New Scotland" series, in which the migration paper outlines Scotland's unique migration needs and proposals designed to meet our demographic challenges?

The First Minister: The issue of migration is central to the economic wellbeing of any society. The United Kingdom is putting itself at a formidable competitive disadvantage by taking such a hostile attitude towards migration. We can see that beginning to have an effect on some of our universities, which have been absolutely wonderful examples of international institutions but are now finding their opportunities constrained by the approach to migration, which is damaging to the interests of Scotland. I signal the Scottish Government's willingness to engage constructively on finding routes to support migration, which will help to boost our economy.

I note the information that was published this week in the Royal Bank of Scotland purchasing managers index report, which showed that, notwithstanding those challenges, private sector business activity growth in Scotland was the second highest across the United Kingdom's 12 nations and regions, which demonstrates that Scotland is very much open for business.

Drug-related Harm

5. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister what progress the Scottish Government has made in reducing drug-related harm, in light of the latest quarterly statistics showing a 17 per cent increase in suspected drug deaths. (S6F-03229)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was disappointed to read the statistics that came out this week. The loss of life from drugs in Scotland is truly devastating, and I express my heartfelt condolences to anyone who has lost a loved one through addiction.

The Government is working to tackle the drugs crisis by delivering the £250 million national mission to reduce the number of drug deaths and improve the lives of those who are impacted by drugs. The mission has led to investment in a range of measures to prevent deaths and reduce harms, including implementation of medication assisted treatment standards, widening naloxone access, increasing residential rehabilitation capacity and improving surveillance.

The emergence of new substances raises further concerns. However, for those who are affected by problem substance use and for those who work in the field supporting people every day, I reinforce our commitment to continue to do all that we can to reduce the tragic loss of life.

Sue Webber: The data that was published last week reveals that around 25 people a week are dying from drug use. The new stats that were published this week show that, compared with last year, suspected drug deaths are up 10 per cent in the 12 months to March 2024. The number of

deaths is not reducing. The Scottish Recovery Consortium has called that a move in the wrong direction. Will the First Minister explain why successive Scottish National Party leaders have failed to tackle the drug deaths crisis in Scotland and, instead, have followed the same failed approach? Will he finally accept the need to change tack and give us full backing for our right to recovery bill?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the seriousness and significance of the issue. On the question of the proposed right to addiction recovery (Scotland) bill, I have indicated that I will happily meet Douglas Ross to discuss it. I am open to taking seriously any elements of that bill that will help us in our efforts as part of the process. I say to Sue Webber that the Government has tried—and, under my leadership, will continue to try—to be as open as possible to constructing measures that will be effective in delivering better outcomes than we are currently delivering.

At First Minister's question time a couple of weeks ago, I responded to Sue Webber's colleague Russell Findlay by indicating that additional threats are coming our way because of the strength of some of the synthetic opioids that are now entering the drugs market in Scotland. That has to be tackled, and we are trying to tackle it.

However, I signal the Government's willingness to engage constructively across the Parliament to find ways and interventions that will allow us to reduce the number of drug deaths, because I acknowledge the severity and seriousness of the harm that is caused to families and individuals. I remain open to a wide cross-party discussion on that question.

Rape and Sexual Assault Reports

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that hundreds of rapes and sexual assaults that had been reported by sex workers were not acted upon. (S6F-03233)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was deeply troubled by those reports. Any violence against women, whenever that has occurred, is abhorrent.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on criminal investigations and prosecutions, but I note that Police Scotland launched an operation in 2018 to examine historical sex offences. I want all victims to have the confidence to report sexual crimes, no matter when they happened. Therefore, I am pleased that Police Scotland has encouraged anyone who has not previously reported such assaults to come forward and do so.

Pauline McNeill: Scottish Labour endorses the First Minister's comments on the need to tackle violence against women and girls. However, during the Emma Caldwell murder investigation, nearly 300 rapes and sexual assaults that were reported by sex workers, including those by Emma's killer, were not dealt with by police at the time. A former detective said that, when he worked on the murder inquiry, he received multiple reports of rape, including by Emma's killer, but that they were boxed, marked as irrelevant and not followed up.

Does the First Minister agree that that was a shameful period in time when attitudes meant that sex workers who reported rape were not taken seriously, that those women were vulnerable and should have had their chance to be heard before a jury and, furthermore, that if there had been an investigation at the time, Emma's murderer might have been caught sooner?

The First Minister: Pauline McNeill is a very experienced and long-serving advocate in the whole area of criminal justice, and she knows how much I respect her contribution to Parliament on this matter. She will understand, therefore, that it is difficult for me to comment on some of the issues that she has raised.

Having given that caveat, I absolutely accept that it is a necessity that any reporting of crimes of a sexual nature is taken deadly seriously, and it is my expectation that that will be the case at all times.

I will quote the words of Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith in relation to this matter. She said:

"Time is no barrier to justice ... and if women feel like they want to come forward and report now, then absolutely it's the time to do that."

I encourage individuals to follow the deputy chief constable's invitation and to do that.

In general—with the caveat that I have put on the record already—I think that it is essential that any woman who feels that they have been the victim of a sexual assault, at any stage, should come forward. My expectation of Police Scotland and of the Crown is that that would be taken seriously.

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

MV Isle of Arran (Rescue)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On Monday evening, a female passenger on the MV Isle of Arran fell overboard as the vessel approached Ardrossan. Using the vessel's rescue craft, the crew acted with incredible speed to rescue the woman from the sea and help her to

recover on board. The crew's training and speed of action were the difference between life and death. Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to the Isle of Arran's crew for their heroic efforts in saving a life? *[Applause.]*

The First Minister (John Swinney): I record my personal thanks to the master and the crew of the MV Isle of Arran for the speed and intensity of their response. The level of professionalism that was deployed by the crew is to be commended, but, of course, the training and professionalism of members of staff of the CalMac Ferries network is built up through their commitment to ensuring that they run and operate a safe network. That example should give the public great confidence in the strength and capability of CalMac personnel.

As well as providing a lifeline service to communities across the west coast, CalMac is a key part of the maritime framework in those areas and is regularly tasked with supporting maritime incidents, given its presence in the area. On behalf of the Scottish Government, I express my warmest thanks to the staff who were involved in that important exercise.

Rail Services (Stranraer and Ayr)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): For more than nine months, there have been no rail services in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries, with all rail services between Stranraer and Ayr having been stopped following the arson attack on the Ayr station hotel. Given the considerable disruption to my constituents and visitors over that lengthy time period, and as an incentive to get people back on to the trains, will the First Minister explore every opportunity to work with me, constituents and ScotRail to provide special offers or reduced fares to encourage people back on to the trains when the service restarts in July?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The good news is that we are able to get services running back down to Stranraer in July. I am grateful to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, ScotRail, Transport Scotland, Network Rail and South Ayrshire Council for the work that has been undertaken, because the problem has been a very difficult one. Mr Carson knows the ins and outs of the public safety issues involved in the fire at the station, and I have just answered a question from Mr Gibson on safety on the transport network, so we all know the realities here.

I will give consideration to Mr Carson's proposal. Of course, such things always cost money, which we would have to try to find. However, if Mr Carson would care to write to me with any suggestions that he thinks would be helpful, I would be happy to consider them, along with the transport secretary.

Teacher Jobs (Glasgow)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister has spent quite some time claiming that he is anti-cuts, but the reality is that he is the architect of austerity. Just ask teachers in Glasgow, who, this week, as a result of his Government's cuts, have voted to strike in their latest attempt to save their jobs and protect education. Teachers have spoken, parents and pupils have protested and Parliament has voted. Will the First Minister now finally listen, step in and save those jobs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the significance of the issues that Pam Duncan-Glancy has raised. In previous answers, I have made it clear that, had the Labour Party's budget proposals been accepted by Glasgow City Council, the reductions in the teaching workforce could have been greater than those that are proposed by the existing city council administration.

However, this is where we get to the hard realities of the public finances. Earlier this year, Pam Duncan-Glancy voted against the tax increases that we had put in place in the budget. That would have reduced the amount of money that is available for public services. *[Interruption.]*

How is it remotely credible for the Labour Party to come here and ask me to spend more money on local authority services and education services when it wants to deliver austerity in the Scottish Parliament as well as austerity in the United Kingdom Parliament?

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): That is desperate.

The First Minister: That is the hard reality that is about to confront Mr Sarwar, who is shouting and muttering at me all the time during my answers. However, he cannot have it both ways; he cannot come here and demand that we do more when a Westminster Labour Government is going to propose to cut our budget because of austerity.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport ZoneCard

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Several constituents have contacted me about eye-watering increases of up to 135 per cent on their Strathclyde Partnership for Transport ZoneCard costs. Some Maryhill commuters are now paying the same as someone travelling from much further afield, such as East Kilbride, for example.

I have written to the SPT asking to meet it and urging it to pause the increases scheduled for 24 June. Does the First Minister share my concerns

about the wholly unacceptable increases for my constituents during a cost of living crisis? Are there potential implications for the Scottish Government's fair fares review and its ambitions to have capped fares and integrated ticketing?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am aware of the issue that Mr Doris raises and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport has written to the SPT about it.

The ZoneCard is a commercial ticket that is managed by bus, rail and subway operators. Neither the Scottish Government nor Transport Scotland were part of the fares discussions by the companies involved. We want to make it easier and more affordable for people to choose to travel by public transport, as it will support economic growth, tackle inequality and address climate change.

The fair fares review presents a package of measures to make public transport more accessible, available and affordable, with the cost of transport being more fairly shared across Government, business and society. I hope that some of the thinking in the fair fares review can lead to a different outcome in relation to what is a very significant issue for Mr Doris's constituents and others in the west of Scotland.

Ferry Network

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, commend the actions of the crew of the Isle of Arran during the aforementioned incident. I hope that the First Minister will also acknowledge the many on-going disruptions that are taking place on the west coast ferry network.

Yesterday, no fewer than four vessels were out of action for technical reasons. That is on top of long-standing issues on the Arran route, where the Caledonian Isles vessel is undergoing a series of repairs and is due to be out of action for most of the summer. I hope that the First Minister will understand the disruption that that is causing for our island communities. I have grave concerns that we are simply staring down the barrel of a summer of chaos on our ferry network.

What is the First Minister's Government doing about that chaos? Is he as disappointed as I and my constituents are that not one of his back-bench MSPs signed my motion to allow a members' business debate on that very subject next week?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are obviously instances and examples of problems on the ferry network. We have an ageing fleet and the Government is investing significantly in new vessels. There will be six substantial new vessels in the ferry fleet by 2026, the first of which will come into the network later this year. As Mr Greene will be aware, the second of the Islay

vessels was launched successfully from the yard in Turkey at the weekend.

On a short-term basis, the chartering of the MV Alfred has helped on the Arran routes while the MV Caledonian Isles has been in dry dock for extensive repairs. We also supplemented the network with the purchase of the MV Loch Frisa.

I understand the disruption that is experienced by island communities. As Mr Greene knows, I am a frequent user of the CalMac network, and I will use it again in the next few weeks. We are working with the network, but it is also important to recognise that the network performs superbly well on many occasions, not just in relation to safety issues that Mr Gibson raised, but also in the delivery of essential lifeline services to our communities. I thank CalMac and its staff for their efforts to do so.

Nuclear Energy

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): What is the First Minister's response to the GMB union's call for the Scottish Government to end its opposition to nuclear energy? The union has warned of a risk of this nation

"returning to the days of power cuts and candles",

with

"hundreds of skilled Scots ... already leaving to go abroad"

because of this decline.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I respect the fact that people have a different opinion from me, but I am not a fan of the nuclear industry and I do not support investment in nuclear power plants. I never have and I never will. The country should focus on creating clean, green, renewable energy resources.

We have a formidable track record of investment in Scotland and a formidable record of transformation in the generation of electricity in our country. What would help us is reform of the electricity market in the United Kingdom, which might result in people living in the areas that generate the electricity not having to pay exorbitant energy costs, which is the current procedure in the UK energy market. That might be something that Mr Whitfield could take up with his colleagues, should they be in a position to influence those issues on 5 July and later.

A9 Dualling

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): It is with great sadness that I must report that another person has lost her life on the A9. Our hearts go out to her family and the others who were injured in the incident.

Some weeks ago, at his first First Minister's question time, the First Minister kindly agreed to meet me and fellow MSPs from the Conservative, Labour, Liberal and Alba parties, in order for us all, on a cross-party basis, to put the case for acceleration of the announced programme for completion of the dualling of the A9, which, of course, will have the consequence of fewer lives being lost. I appreciate that the First Minister is limited in what he can say during purdah, but will he give that request the most serious, thorough and sympathetic consideration?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I echo the comments of my colleague Fergus Ewing about the lady who died last night on the A9 near Carrbridge. I am very sorry to hear that news and I express my sympathies to her family and to everyone who has been affected by the incident.

As Mr Ewing will know, the Government has an on-going programme of investment in the A9 dualling—it was set out by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy some months ago. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport now expects to authorise the procurement for the Moy to Tomatin stretch in July. That is our expectation of the completion of the procurement process there.

Just the other week, the procurement process for the Tay crossing to Ballinluig, which is a substantial stretch of the road, was commenced. We did that deliberately to ensure that there is continuity in the delivery of the contract.

Mr Ewing knows me well enough to know that I will give thorough, serious and thoughtful consideration to all the proposals that are put to me, and I look forward to the cross-party group meeting, which I understand is scheduled for next week, to enable me to hear at first hand from colleagues across the chamber about the importance of the issue and how we might act together to accelerate the proposals that are before us.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions. There will be a short suspension before the next item of business to allow those who are leaving the chamber or the gallery to do so.

12:49

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Kindergarten Stage

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12369, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on fostering a discussion on a kindergarten stage in Scotland.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the body of international evidence on the reported benefits of play-based early years education; believes that active, social play is a natural learning drive that helps develop physical fitness, social skills, cognitive capacities and personal qualities; understands that Scotland and the rest of the UK are outliers in Europe in starting formal education at four or five years of age; considers that, since the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) comparisons began, countries with later school starting ages have performed better than those with earlier starts; understands that the UN defines early childhood as being from birth to eight years of age, and that Scottish research has established that there are significant differences in children's levels of development at age five; commends the work of organisations such as Upstart Scotland in promoting the needs of children in early years education based on relationship-centred, child-led, play-based environments, with a greater focus on outdoor learning; notes the belief that a universal play-based kindergarten stage, with a raised formal school starting age, could contribute to closing the attainment gap and be a significant anti-poverty measure, and that it would help provide a true level playing field for all of Scotland's children, including those in the Coatbridge and Chryston constituency, giving every child time to develop the skills and capacities that underpin educational success, improving long-term outcomes and giving every child the best start in life, and further notes the belief that there is a need for a national conversation on early years education to consider a later school starting age preceded by a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage to support optimal development during early childhood and ensure secure foundations, and that such a conversation should be open to all who wish to contribute, including early years practitioners, parents, teachers, academics and children, as well as policy makers.

12:51

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): First, I thank all members who have supported my motion, which calls for a discussion on a kindergarten stage in Scotland. I pay particular thanks to my colleague Kaukab Stewart for initially leading the discussion on the topic prior to her promotion to Government.

The tendency for children to start formal education at four or five years old means that Scotland—and indeed the United Kingdom, for that matter—is an outlier in Europe. Our tradition of starting school at that age was enshrined in the Education (Scotland) Act 1872. That piece of legislation was groundbreaking for ensuring that

every child got an education. However, since then, there has been a century and a half of research and improved understanding of child psychology and development, and we have an archaic mindset. Looking across Europe, we see that delaying starting academic studies is becoming more widespread, with many countries opting for their children to start school at six or even seven years old.

Change is possible. In Scotland today, the deferment of a four-year-old child is now the decision of the parent or legal guardian, thanks to the tireless work of the Give Them Time campaign. Its campaign for a further year of nursery funding for all children who defer their primary 1 start in Scotland was a resounding success, and it reflects the change in attitudes on school starting ages that we are seeing in Scotland today. I put on record my thanks to all those involved in that campaign. I know that they support the kindergarten model, too.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I echo everything that Fulton MacGregor has just said. Does he agree with me that Diane Delaney is an absolute trailblazer when it comes to campaigning and highlighting those issues?

Fulton MacGregor: I completely agree with the member: Diane Delaney, who is a constituent of both hers and mine, is certainly that.

At its most basic level, a kindergarten stage is a stage whereby the emphasis of a child's education is more on opportunities for children to play. It is a way for children to learn through enjoyable experiences rather than formal teaching. It is underpinned by the development of social and communication skills, teacher-led opportunities for art, drama, music, science or maths investigations and listening to stories.

The benefits of such a stage are self-evident. Physically, it promotes physical self-confidence and bodily control. Mentally, it allows children's creativity to flourish, as well as helping to develop self-control and problem solving. Socially, it provides a perfect opportunity for children to progress their interpersonal skills, such as communication, empathy and teamwork. Cognitively, play-based learning can improve a child's innate understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts.

A kindergarten stage would not be free time for the children to do as they please; rather, it would be an educational approach that supports not just their academic development but their all-round physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

Another key component of that play-based approach is access to the outdoors and increased contact with the natural world. Today, fewer of our

children spend time outdoors. It is no surprise that they often stay inside instead and are more likely to be watching television or engaging with our ever-increasing digital world. Anybody who is a parent—as I am—knows exactly what that looks like. With outdoor play being such an important part of kindergartens globally, a kindergarten stage could give all Scottish children time and space to develop the habits of outdoor play, which promote mental and physical health and wellbeing.

For those who fear that focusing on those aspects will inhibit academic achievement, a large body of research has found the opposite to be the case. In fact, promoting physical, emotional, social and cognitive development has been shown to promote and complement academic achievement. In essence, a kindergarten stage, rather than throwing children in at the deep end when they are just four or five years old, can give children the tools to cope with the rigours of academic stresses.

I have spoken a lot about the hypothetical benefits, but I will present some facts. It might be a surprise to some to learn that, ever since the programme for international student assessment—PISA—comparisons began, countries with an early school starting age have not performed as well as those in which formal education starts later. In 66 per cent of countries worldwide, children start school at age six; in 22 per cent, they start at age seven; and in only 12 per cent do they start at age four or five. Last year, the best-performing countries were China, Singapore, Estonia, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Taiwan, Finland, Poland and Ireland. Four of those—China, Estonia, Finland and Poland—have a school starting age of seven. In the rest, children start school at six. None starts them at five.

UNICEF surveys of children's wellbeing have continually shown a correlation between countries with later school starting ages and improvements in children's wellbeing.

In the campaign to foster a discussion on a kindergarten stage in Scotland, particular credit must lie with Upstart Scotland, which has representatives joining us in the gallery this afternoon—I am not sure whether they are in yet. Upstart Scotland has made it its mission to promote and advocate for a kindergarten stage to be introduced in Scotland. Its website is full of invaluable information, academic sources and holistic discourse that support the advancement of that play-based stage being considered in Scotland. I think that Upstart Scotland representatives are coming into the gallery now.

The conversation about the topic is growing. Last month, I hosted a round-table meeting that brought together Scottish education stakeholders and a group of Norwegian kindergarten

practitioners. That meeting concentrated on a discussion about the different education systems of Norway and Scotland, with a particular focus on the Norwegian kindergarten system. Those Norwegian kindergarten staff work in a small private kindergarten with 20 children. Their focus areas were farming, food production and outdoor living, as well as other areas of learning. It was eye opening to learn how beneficial that opportunity is for the Norwegian children, especially in showing how that stage empowers children in so many ways at such an early age.

Most strikingly perhaps is the evidence that a later formal school setting can help to close the attainment gap. We know that a key goal of the Scottish Government is to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It would be presumptuous to assume that changing educational policy alone could close that gap, but a play-based stage for all across Scotland has the power to level the playing field and provide children from impoverished backgrounds with the similar experiences and support that those in more advantaged circumstances are provided with.

To put it bluntly, when children are expected to make the transition from a nursery setting to a formal school environment with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy at a time when they are only halfway through their early years, disadvantaged children are put at an even further disadvantage as they must catch up in the areas of problem solving and language development.

I know that some schools take a play-based approach in primary 1—the minister might come to that. For example, the school that my children go to does that now. It did not do that for my oldest child, but it does for my middle child. The point is that the approach is not consistent enough even within local authority areas, never mind across the country.

There would, of course, be challenges in adopting the approach. Our current system of early years learning and our nursery sector would have to be revisited. There would be the obvious question of how we would deliver the additional training required for new and existing early years staff. There have been encouraging developments on that with Play Scotland's work with the Scottish Qualifications Authority on a play pedagogy qualification, which has just been recognised with accredited status. Any national discussion must include an assessment of training needs and the identification of where training will come from and who will deliver it, along with a costed programme for implementation.

Likewise, our current mix of local authority provision, private, voluntary and independent childcare and the primary 1 and 2 years would have to be co-ordinated to deliver the kindergarten

stage, which would require to be financed. I do not deny that that will be a challenge, but I firmly believe that it is one well worth taking on. I do not have the time today to provide a forensic examination of the costs, but this is only the beginning of a discussion.

Scotland is still set in its Victorian approach to formal learning. Although the discussion is at an early stage, we must seriously consider the range of benefits that introducing a kindergarten stage could bring to our children. I can understand why some may have reservations, but that is not a new idea. Countries that have introduced such a stage have seen hugely improved and well-rounded development for their children. I will continue advocating on the topic and encourage all parties to dedicate time to researching the potential value of having kindergartens in Scotland.

I again thank Upstart Scotland and the numerous other stakeholders that have diligently and convincingly set out the arguments to modernise the Scottish education system and to bring us into line with our European neighbours.

I will close with an abridged quote from Sue Palmer, Upstart's honorary president:

"No child should be in school at the age of five ... The poverty-related attainment gap is at root a developmental issue. By starting formal teaching too soon, we consolidate this gap. Too-early introduction to formal learning generates anxiety which can affect one's mental health for life."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacGregor, I have been very generous, but you are now at almost 10 minutes. Please complete your speech.

Fulton MacGregor: I will leave it there, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr MacGregor. My clock is at nine minutes and 52 seconds. The chamber one was not switched on, in error.

We now move to the open debate. I urge members to stick to their allotted time of up to four minutes.

13:01

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate and I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing it to the chamber. I am particularly keen to see a wider debate about whether to move to a kindergarten system and stage in Scotland, delaying the commencement of formal education to perhaps six or even seven.

As the motion says, such an approach is not uncommon internationally, with countries taking that approach often having higher levels of attainment than produced by our UK system. I can

see the advantage in having an expanded and structured play-based system in Scotland. Fulton MacGregor suggests that there would be benefits for physical fitness, social skills and cognitive capacity more generally, which would put in place the building blocks for longer-term learning and enhancing children's personal qualities.

As anyone would do when looking at changes to the school system, I tend to think of my own family. My son could have gone to school at four but went at five years old, when he was certainly more than ready to go to school. He went to a superb nursery, but he was ready to move on, so the question we must ask ourselves is what children move on to.

There are play-based activities in primary 1 and onwards anyway, so perhaps those could be expanded and a hybrid system could be introduced to the early years of primary school, instead of expanding the early years sector. That might be a possibility. That is my way of saying that I am willing to be convinced about having a kindergarten stage, which is what our conversation is all about.

I want to know about the interaction between core literacy and numeracy skills and how they will be enhanced at that early stage as part of active play and structured learning in a delivery model that is different to the current one. Interestingly, I was told at a recent parents night that there will be a more structured and traditional approach to learning for my son when he enters primary 4 in mid-August. We can already see that schools and local authorities are seeking to innovate from primary 1 to primary 3 and will continue doing so.

I remember, when my son was in primary 1, that parents, including us, asked why the kids did not have pens or pencils in their hands and were not doing a lot of writing. It was explained to us that working with young people's emotions, interpersonal skills, self-worth and dignity is vitally important and is a really good foundation for later life and, importantly, for learning. That is my way of saying that some of what Fulton McGregor wants—maybe just a wee bit—might be starting to evolve naturally in the innovation that is happening in primary schools now and that I am willing to be convinced about a more dramatic shift.

It is a fascinating idea. I think that we would have to build a lot of faith with many parents, who would be saying in response, just as I would be, "Where is my kid's jotter? Where is their pencil? Where is their homework?" and all those kinds of things that we naturally come to expect. If we are developing and innovating, we have to take parents and young people with us; it is vitally important to have the conversation. I have a wee girl who is three, and as a dad, as much as an MSP, I am interested to know what that would look

like for me and my family, as well as for all the families that I am proud to represent in Maryhill and Springburn.

Given the time constraints, I will leave it there. I thank Fulton MacGregor for securing the debate.

13:05

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Fulton MacGregor for lodging the motion for debate in the chamber and for continuing the work of Kaukab Stewart. I will quickly mention my respect for the inclusion of his constituency, Coatbridge and Chryston, in the motion. I will be a little bit open now. My gran was born and raised in Gartsherrie, along with seven brothers and sisters. After working with the Salvation Army in London, she returned—I hope that Mr MacGregor will forgive the slight diversion—to a neighbouring constituency in Garrowhill. My great-grandfather was the leader of the Gartsherrie silver band, although I was not old enough to hear him play, and my dad went to Coatbridge high school. I have an awful lot of fondness for the area that Mr MacGregor represents. However, I digress.

The motion is about fostering a discussion on a kindergarten stage in Scotland, and I look forward to discussing how that could be done and what the model and the implications of it would be, whether those are unintended or otherwise. I commend Upstart Scotland and other organisations for the work that they do to highlight the importance of an early years education that is based on creative play and social connection. When we think about it, that is not a surprising idea: when I started working at the Parliament a couple of years ago, I was not used to the phone that I was given, so I played with it for a while until I understood its functions. We are more likely to understand how things work by doing and trying, than by sitting and reading a manual. That is human nature.

How our brain functions in formative years should inform early years childcare as well as our educational and societal processes. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University noted that

"When children have opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation skills, individuals and society experience lifelong benefits. These skills are crucial for learning and development. They also enable positive behaviour and allow us to make healthy choices".

It went on to say:

"Providing the support that children need to build these skills at home, in early care and education programs, and in other settings they experience regularly is one of society's most important responsibilities. Growth-promoting environments provide children with 'scaffolding' that helps them practice necessary skills before they must perform them alone."

Understanding the process for developing cognitive function is imperative, as it has many bearings on the issues in society that we are trying to address. Encompassing that in our early years education system will support all children, regardless of their background.

If we are all of one mind—and so far, I think that we are—and we proceed with advancing a discussion about the kindergarten model for Scotland, it is essential that we do not minimise the options that we research right out of the gate. The Nordic models are regularly highlighted in discussions. Indeed, Upstart Scotland focused on the Finnish model and a recent report from Parenting across Scotland pushes a Swedish one. It may be the case that those models fit in well with Scottish anthropology, but we should not presume that a Singaporean model or a Canadian model would not work in Scotland. Upstart Scotland highlighted that very point on its website. Mr MacGregor has already referred to it, by noting that, in 2023, the best performing countries were, in descending order: China, Singapore, Estonia, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Taiwan, Finland, Poland and Ireland. China, Estonia, Finland and Poland have a school starting age of seven, and the rest have a school starting age of six.

In conclusion, we should fully embrace the opportunity, but it is not the time to limit the scope of the discussion: we need to look around the world rather than just across the water.

13:09

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in what is perhaps one of the more fascinating members' business debates. Along with others, I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing it to the chamber.

There is an interesting discussion over a pedagogy, a fixed asset—our current schooling system—and the needs of our individual children. A lot of parents will echo Bob Doris's comment that his child was ready to start school. Similarly, there are parents who recognise that their child is not ready to start school, and there is the option to extend that nursery year, as we have discussed.

Fulton MacGregor: This point is for Martin Whitfield as well as for Bob Doris. Does he accept that it is not just about whether a child is ready for school? Both my children who have gone to school so far were "ready" at five. It is about whether, if we were to change the system altogether so that children do not go to school at five, that would be better for society as a whole. That is the point that has been made by all the countries where the school age is already higher than five.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful for that intervention, which speaks to the heart of what I am going to talk about. The way to look at this is to look at the young people themselves—from babies and young children—all the way through.

Intellectually, we can identify that initial movement of a baby just thrashing around on a mat as unoccupied play. Then there is the sort of solitary play in which a child does not want to be with anyone else, except perhaps their mother or father. Then there is spectator play, in which they observe other children playing. Then there is parallel play, in which they sit down—often in a sandpit, with their hands in—and play by themselves but next to others. Then there is associative play, in which they want to start involving others. Finally, there is co-operative play, which is very much at the foundation of play pedagogy and what organisations talk about. The ability not to argue with the child next to them because they have taken a piece of Lego, the ability to solve a problem because they want something on the other side of the table that they cannot reach, and the ability to be helped up by one of their young comrades when they fall over a root in the forest are all the very soft but essential skills that are required.

That sits at the heart of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in articles 31 and 29. I will spend the short time that I have on that in particular. Article 29 talks about education being

"directed to ... The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential".

How we support that approach—how we scaffold that and provide the environment to achieve it—is not fixed by adults' decisions that "at this age, you do this, and at that age you do that." It is about understanding the flexible needs.

Mention has been made of existing schools in which play, particularly in P1 and P2, is such an important element. However, it has taken many years to move what is at the heart of the curriculum for excellence about the use of play into the classrooms—if I can use that phrase. I visit schools and watch P1s in the most wonderful outdoor play areas. I talked about fixed assets and mention has been made of training. We have wonderful early years workers, but of course they need support and training. It is also about the facilities and experiences that our young people and children have the opportunity to be in. It is right to mention Charlotte Bowes and #Play4P1, because the network of support that is there for practitioners is phenomenal.

I am conscious of time, Deputy Presiding Officer. To open the discussion is very important, but just to sit with a formulaic idea of replacing the

start of school at four or five with something else is to miss the opportunity to have a transitional experience for young people so that they learn through play not just up to eight but into adulthood, and are ready to take the next steps, supported by the communities around them.

13:14

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): As colleagues have done, I congratulate Fulton MacGregor on securing the debate, and I thank Upstart Scotland, Give Them Time and everyone else who has long campaigned in this space.

The Scottish Greens were proud to propose a kindergarten stage in our manifesto for the most recent election to this Parliament. Specifically, we proposed a kindergarten stage between the ages of three and six, and formal primary school starting at seven, which would bring Scotland into line with Finland and a number of other high-performing nations that Roz McCall mentioned a moment ago.

I recognise that other members would prefer a kindergarten for ages three to five and school starting at six. It is important to tease out that detail but, at this stage, the priority is on the agreement in principle to move forward with the conversation, because a consensus is emerging.

Why should we raise the starting age for formal primary school? We should start by recognising that the status quo in Scotland and across the UK is not correct just because that is how it has always been—as Fulton MacGregor mentioned—since the Victorian era. We are an international outlier in putting four-and-a-half-year-olds into formal schooling.

I will start by addressing one of the myths about the proposals. Those of us who advocate for a kindergarten stage are not proposing that we delay a child's education. We believe that that education would be better if we delayed the start of formal primary school and established a kindergarten stage.

A couple of years ago, I commissioned Dr Kylie Bradfield and Professor Mark Priestley to summarise the evidence for and against kindergarten and raising the primary school starting age. The arguments for the status quo—the very early school starting age in the UK—were rarely based on educational benefits.

Two primary benefits are usually cited for what we currently have. The first is child protection because, for many vulnerable children, school is the safest place for them to be. However, kindergarten would of course be an equally safe place.

The second benefit is an economic argument that children who start school earlier generally

enter the workforce earlier and, therefore, work for longer before they retire. However, I think that that is a bit of a soulless argument, because we are more than units of labour.

When young people start school at a later age, there is clear evidence of better educational attainment throughout their time in school. In fact, Ashlesha Datar's 2006 study found a bigger, long-term educational attainment benefit for vulnerable and at-risk children who started later rather than earlier. Another significant advantage is that a number of studies have found mental health benefits—by the time that they reach their late teens—for young people who start formal schooling at a later rather than younger age and have the kindergarten experience first.

Much of that comes back to the simple concept of joy. Children should enjoy learning and enjoy their time at nursery, kindergarten and school. Play-based learning at a kindergarten stage means that, for many children, their first experience of education is a joyful one—not the jarring one that a number of us experienced as we moved from nursery into a more formal primary school setting.

That is why the Scottish Greens manifesto proposes that three-to-six kindergarten stage. We want children to be happy and to enjoy learning. We want education policy to be evidence based. I absolutely agree with Roz McCall that we need to look globally at the substantial evidence base that is out there.

In closing, I pay credit, as Martin Whitfield did, to the teachers in schools who are already delivering play-based learning, particularly in primary 1 but, in many cases, up to primary 3. Practice has already shifted in our schools, but our system is holding us back from fully realising the benefits of that.

I urge the Scottish Government to take that conversation forward with the experts—the unions that represent teachers and early years staff, councils and, of course, parents and carers. Much like exam reform at the other end of the formal school experience, it is time to leave behind the Victorian-era constraints that we still have on our education system, and move to a kindergarten stage where we can give children the joyful first experience of education that they deserve. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Our guests in the gallery are very welcome and I am glad that you made it for part of the debate, but we do not invite gallery guests to clap during our proceedings. I am sure that, now that you know, you will heed that.

13:19

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I was not intending to say anything in this debate, but members have made very thought-provoking contributions. I have to say that I am a stickler when it comes to this issue and will talk about improving the lives of children and young people at every given opportunity.

This week, I received in my inbox a fascinating manifesto pledge by the campaign group 2020 Together entitled "It's all about the children". It had a launch last week; unfortunately, I was unable to attend, due to other commitments, but I think that it hits home in showing the importance of the early years to a child's development.

Back in 2016, the Scottish Government promised to provide 1,140 hours of free childcare to children from the ages of three to five, which is exactly the age range that we are talking about today as we look at how we advance the learning experience of children and young people from a really early age. I do think that we need to look at what we have right now before we look at what we can do in the future, because we need those structures to be in place if this sort of scheme is to work. Indeed, Fulton MacGregor touched on that in this speech. The early years offering that we have just now will need to be relooked at, should we embark on this huge challenge, but I do think that it is a challenge worth embarking on.

The manifesto that I mentioned contains some really important elements, and I would appreciate it if the minister and I could discuss it, perhaps not today, but at some point in the future. It comes from a group of active campaigners in my region who want to make sure that the experience for children at the early stages of their lives is the best that it possibly can be. Although the early years offering just now has been positive for local authorities, it has certainly not been as positive for the private, voluntary and independent sector. Although the nurseries in that sector provide the same level of care for children, and although their staff have the same qualifications as those in local authority settings, the pay disparity between the two settings is stark. Someone in a private, voluntary and independent nursery will get a living wage of around £12 an hour, while someone in a job in a local authority early years setting will get roughly £16 an hour.

That makes clear the disparity that exists for those trying to give our young people the best possible start in life. We can see how things are already on an unequal footing, even before we begin to look at redeveloping childcare and early years according to the terms of today's debate on a kindergarten stage and on learning through play. That sort of learning is vital to a child's development. Indeed, I know that for myself; my

toddler, who is going to be two next month, challenges me every single day to learn through play, and I have thoroughly enjoyed that experience with her.

As I have said, in looking at this issue as a whole, we need to look at what we are offering just now, get the structures and pillars in place and sort out the fundamental problems. Once we do that, we will have the right opportunity to look at how we can improve things and create and develop something new for Scotland that gives children the best possible start in life. I therefore challenge the minister to look at what we have just now and fix the problems with the provision of 1,140 hours to ensure that, when we come to look at the kindergarten stage, we are starting from the best possible place. That is what will benefit our children best, and that, after all, is the most important thing that we as parliamentarians can do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Natalie Don to respond to the debate. You have up to seven minutes, minister.

13:23

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don): I am thankful to Fulton MacGregor for bringing this debate to the chamber, and I truly welcome the many excellent contributions that we have had from members and which have been informed by research and evidence from Upstart Scotland. I whole-heartedly agree that it is important to give our children the best possible start in life, and I strongly support this opportunity to foster an open dialogue on the best way of achieving that over the longer term.

I note the points that many colleagues have raised about the international evidence on the benefits of play-based early years education; on the benefits of active social play; on the issue of Scotland's school starting age when compared with other European countries, and the fact that it has not changed since the 19th century; and on how a universal play-based kindergarten stage with a raised formal school starting age could contribute to closing the attainment gap. These are very important considerations that I take seriously and am interested in exploring further.

I absolutely recognise the critical importance of children's early years experiences to their life outcomes, particularly when those children grow up in disadvantaged circumstances. I am aware that, since the pandemic, there has been an increase in the proportion of children who are not meeting their developmental milestones, and that there are persistent inequalities between children living in the most and the least deprived areas, so the debate is timely and important.

Members might not hear me say this often, but I whole-heartedly agree with some of what Meghan Gallacher says, because we do need to look at what is happening now. However, there have been huge achievements, and I will talk about some of them. Since 2014, we have undertaken one of the most significant reforms to public services in a generation. We have almost doubled the entitlement to high-quality funded early learning and childcare from 600 to 1,140 hours per year for all eligible children. We know that provision of high-quality ELC makes an important contribution to children's outcomes, particularly, as I said, when they are growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. There has been near-universal uptake of the offer of funded ELC among three and four-year-olds, and independent research has shown that 97 per cent of parents are satisfied with the quality of funded ELC.

We should not underestimate what an achievement that is. However, and as I have said in Parliament, I do not shy away from specific concerns on rates. I have discussed that with many members, and I continue to discuss it with stakeholders such as 2020 Together. The member is aware of the on-going work on the rates review, and I am happy to discuss that further with the member. I do not feel that this debate is necessarily the right place for that discussion, because I have a lot that I would like to get through.

Another important achievement that we need to highlight—which other members have also highlighted—is on deferring school entry. Mr MacGregor rightly mentioned the tireless efforts of the Give Them Time campaign. As a result of those efforts, since 23 August, all children who defer their school entry are automatically entitled to that additional year of funded ELC. I know that members agree that that is a very important step forward in supporting parents to make those critical decisions in the best interests of their child, without the worry of additional costs.

I am a huge advocate of our approach in Scotland of promoting play-based, child-centred and outdoor learning in the early years. That is critical to supporting children to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, including in respect of their early language development, which is an area of children's development that has been particularly affected.

I always like to bring in my personal experiences of witnessing excellent practice in person. On my recent visit to Little Bugs outdoor nursery in Dunfermline, I saw how outdoor learning and play benefits children in respect of their physical health and mental, social and emotional wellbeing. Children in ELC spend on average 39 per cent of

their time outdoors. We are making very good progress on that.

That kind of excellent practice can also be delivered in the early years of primary school, because of the flexibility of Scotland's curriculum for excellence, including the early level, which deliberately spans from age three until the end of primary 1. Our internationally recognised practice guidance, "Realising the ambition: Being Me", is driving forward efforts to support child-centred play and ensure continuity and progression in learning as children begin their primary school education.

Martin Whitfield spoke about the UNCRC and the need for a child's education to be tailored to that child. "Realising the ambition: Being Me" is wholly focused on that. Upstart Scotland has said:

"If this document can be translated into practice in all Scottish early years settings (including P1), Scotland's ELC provision will be up there with the Nordic countries".

It is imperative that we continue in our current efforts to ensure that realising the ambition is effectively and consistently implemented in early learning and childcare and in the early years of primary school. As Fulton MacGregor stated, there has been excellent progress in recent years. I saw that at first hand when I visited Roslin primary school last year, a visit that I have spoken of previously in the chamber.

I know that we still have some way to go to ensure that play pedagogy is fully embedded at the early level. To bring some of that together, I am keen that we understand fully the impact of implementing "Realising the ambition" and our transformational investment in ELC and the deferrals policy, which could help to inform any further major reforms. The final report on the evaluation of the expansion of funded ELC to 1,140 hours is due to be published by the end of 2025.

It is important to highlight that an ambitious programme of education and skills reform is under way to improve outcomes for people who experience and deliver education in Scotland. Members have referred to Upstart Scotland's evidence, which shows that countries with a later school starting age perform better than those where formal education starts earlier. I am therefore open to exploring options for what a kindergarten stage would entail, building on the progress that has been made to date and the evaluation of our early years policies. On the specific points about PISA, I am interested in considering the data in further detail, alongside wider evidence.

We cannot shy away from the fact that introducing a kindergarten stage would be a fundamental change to our education system. All members who contributed touched on the factors

that would need to be considered. It would require significant further work to take stock of the evidence, to understand the views of families, which Bob Doris rightly highlighted, and, of course, those of children, and to consider carefully both the costs involved and the implications for our workforce. However, I want to be clear with members that I have listened carefully to the views that have been expressed in the debate. I am open to discussing the best approach with members from across the chamber and examining the matters that would need to be considered.

I again thank members who have contributed to this important discussion. I share their vision for early years education being based on relationship-centred, child-led and play-based environments with a greater focus on outdoor learning. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the chamber and with organisations such as Upstart Scotland to make that a reality for all of Scotland's children.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2 pm.

13:31

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time.

Public Gallery Admissions Process

1. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will review the process for admitting visitors to the public gallery in the chamber. (S6O-03585)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Our key priorities for admitting visitors to the public gallery are ensuring public safety, minimising disruption to chamber business and the security of the Parliament. We always want to ensure that visitors enjoy the experience and feel that they are participating in our work, and I welcome any feedback on the process.

Tess White: Members' business debates are a brilliant opportunity for MSPs to raise issues that matter to their constituents. However, during my debate last month, constituents from Angus and Aberdeenshire were unable to hear my opening remarks because they were still filing in, which was disappointing for them because they had travelled so far.

I have attended other members' business debates at which visitors were seated at the back of the gallery, as is the case today, with plenty of seats at the front remaining unused, which we can also see today. I welcome the points about experience and safety, but we can clearly see that the situation is not acceptable. Will the corporate body consider reviewing processes in the people's Parliament to ensure that opening speeches do not begin until all visitors are seated, and that better use is made of the seating arrangements?

Claire Baker: I recognise the member's frustration, and I have also been in that situation in relation to members' business debates. Effort is made to ensure that the public gallery is seated in advance of the start of any debate, but there can be delays, particularly with Thursday afternoon debates, when members of the public are leaving after First Minister's question time. FMQs is usually busy and we have only one door in and out of the gallery.

As the member said, the members' business debates generate great interest, and people often travel great distances to get here. I agree that they

should be seated for the opening speech, and I also agree that we should have greater flexibility in the seating arrangements in the gallery. A small working group between the various offices will be set up over recess to look to improve that experience.

Catering Produce and Products (Source)

2. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether any of its contracted catering companies source produce or products from occupied land in Gaza or the West Bank. (S6O-03583)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Catering services at the Scottish Parliament are provided through our service partner, Sodexo. There is a focus on using local and seasonal products where possible. I am advised by Sodexo that none of its products is grown or supplied from occupied land in Gaza or the West Bank.

Lorna Slater: The corporate body will be aware that the Scottish Government has a clear procurement policy note that states:

“Exploitation of assets in illegal settlements ... is likely to be regarded as constituting ‘grave professional misconduct’ for the purposes of procurement law”.

Does the SPCB share that view, and will it undertake to review the products that it sources to ensure that none comes from illegal settlements?

Claire Baker: I appreciate the points that the member has raised. The corporate body will discuss those points, look at our procurement policy and engage with Sodexo. The member might be interested to know that the catering contract will be put out to tender within the next couple of years.

MSP Staff Training Budget

3. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it would consider increasing the £500 annual training budget that is allocated to MSP offices for staff training. (S6O-03586)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Following a review in 2021 of the reimbursement of members’ expenses scheme, the corporate body delegated authority to the Scottish parliamentary service learning and development team to approve up to £500 per member annually through the incidental and ancillary employment cost provision to facilitate any additional ad hoc job-specific training needs, such as attending seminars and conferences.

Claims in excess of that amount have to be submitted to the SPCB for approval. However,

current expenditure against the expenses scheme is extremely low. In 2023-24, there were just four claims against the scheme. Therefore, the corporate body’s view is that there is no current requirement to increase the provision.

Ben Macpherson: I would emphasise that knowledge, experience and office size can vary, as can costs, because of where constituency offices are situated in the country, for example. As an addition to what the member has just described and to the £500 annual budget per office, perhaps a more individualised proposal system could be implemented for training, whereby members can source external training opportunities that would suit their office need and then seek approval from allowances for them, on a case-by-case basis in a timeous and practical way. That would help to deliver more flexible and tailored development opportunities for all staff.

Jackson Carlaw: I hear what Mr Macpherson says. As well as the scheme that I have identified—the members expenses scheme that was agreed in 2021—a central budget for MSP staff learning and development is in place to deliver all recurring training needs for MSP staff. That budget is managed by the SPCB’s learning and development team. The corporate body is keen to maximise the central budget to the benefit of all MSP staff, in order to realise economies of scale and value for money while ensuring equal and fair access. However, we will look further at Mr Macpherson’s suggestion.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I back what Ben Macpherson has said about the budget. I found outsourcing of training for parliamentary staff in my constituency office extremely difficult. Will the member say a wee bit more about what could be available and what could be done to ensure that constituency staff in rural and island areas are able to meet their parliamentary colleagues more regularly for training?

Jackson Carlaw: As I indicated, there is the £500 dispensation. It is also possible for claims in excess of that to be made and for them to be considered by the corporate body.

More generally, the current corporate body has taken the decision to have a comprehensive review of the entire structure of membership expenses, with a view to making recommendations for the next parliamentary session. Obviously, we will learn from the experience of the provision that we have had during the current parliamentary session to see whether there need to be changes that would accommodate some of the concerns that are being expressed, specifically with regard to Beatrice Wishart’s constituency office as well as others who might be in a similar position.

British Sign Language Services

4. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body how much of its annual budget is allocated to the provision of BSL services to ensure that the Parliament is accessible to those who use BSL, in light of the 2022 census results showing that BSL is used by 117,300 people, or 2.2 per cent of the population. (S6O-03584)

Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I thank the member for the question and recognise her work to raise the profile and use of British Sign Language in the Scottish Parliament.

Although inclusion is more complex than a simple pro rata of budgets per population using a language, each year we spend around £90,000 to £100,000 on our services and staff to support and grow BSL inclusion.

The SPCB is proud of its achievements through its first BSL plan and is about to launch the consultation on its second plan. The second plan will build on our current work, not least in continuing to expand the proportion of chamber business that is BSL interpreted from the current level of around 12 per cent, and in continuing to provide interpretation of every First Minister's question time.

Karen Adam: In response to my previous question to the SPCB on the wider roll-out of BSL accessibility, I was advised to raise the issue at the Conveners Group, which I have done, and I was advised there that the Parliament does not have the necessary resources to facilitate BSL accessibility across all committee work.

Although recent efforts have been commendable, deaf people and BSL users want to be included in more issues than just those that affect their communication needs. They seek inclusion in all areas of democracy. Can the SPCB allocate the necessary resources to ensure that those individuals have direct access to all democratic processes, thereby promoting true inclusivity in our parliamentary system?

Christine Grahame: The member might be interested to know that we interpreted or translated into BSL 12 per cent of chamber business in the first five months of this year, 15 per cent of our committee calls for views, and 20 per cent of our festival of politics events in 2023, which has risen to more than 30 per cent in the 2024 programme.

However, I return to the fact that we are launching our draft BSL2 plan to build on that work, not least in continuing to expand BSL-interpreted chamber business, as well as providing interpretation of every FMQ. The member raises

an important issue, so if she can be more specific about what she requires, particularly with regard to committees, I am sure that we can explore and consider that in the draft BSL2 plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sharon Doweey is joining us online for question 5.

Security Review

5. Sharon Doweey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on the review commissioned by the security team, in light of the protest that took place on 21 February 2024. (S6O-03582)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The protest on 21 February was the first time that a protest at the Parliament attempted to physically prevent the public from entering the building. The review has highlighted that communications to those in the building, those trying to leave the building and those arriving were not good enough, and that some people were left feeling unsafe.

The security office conducted a lessons-learned review and developed a set of rapid communications that will be deployed in real time to building occupants and those known to be travelling to the building. Work has progressed in the security office on response plans for disruptive protests, and work is under way with events organisers to make it easier to communicate quickly with those who are expected to attend events.

Sharon Doweey: On the night in question, following the blockage of one exit by protesters, the Parliament's security team directed members and guests to an alternative exit. However, it appeared that the protesters quickly moved to that new location and continued their harassment and abuse. I spoke with the people who were in the Parliament building that night, including young apprentices, some of whom were in tears. They spoke of concerns about their safety and treatment. Has the corporate body identified any involvement from a member or their staff in providing inside information to protesters? If so, what consequences will be applied to address that behaviour?

Claire Baker: I understand that the member has corresponded with the Presiding Officer on those matters. At the time, there were suggestions that a pass holder was providing information to protesters on where to protest. The security office looked into that claim, including reviewing closed-circuit television and speaking to staff on duty at the time. However, no evidence has been found to support that allegation.

Education Services (Access)

6. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on how it is widening access to its educational services. (S6O-03548)

Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The education service is a key part of our public engagement strategy delivery and actively works to sustain and grow a wide reach of schools that use it. Our recent members' feedback surveys reflected positive experiences, as well as the challenges that some schools are facing in travelling to Edinburgh.

As we have informed members previously, the subsidy review is part of the SPCB's public engagement strategy. That is under a review that is due to conclude in the autumn. Any changes to the priorities of the education service would flow from that, given the important role that the service plays in its delivery.

Pam Gosal: Educational visits to Parliament provide pupils with a first-hand experience of the democratic process, and it is important for young people to witness the institutions that shape our country's governance. Earlier this year, primary 5 pupils from Our Lady of Loretto primary school in Dalmeir, in my region, were denied that experience due to travel costs. Although Scottish schoolchildren can claim back 85 per cent of the travel expenses to visit their United Kingdom Parliament, the Scottish Parliament offers no financial assistance for travel. What consideration has the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body given to allowing a percentage of travel costs to be claimed back for school visits?

Christine Grahame: To give some context, in the school year that is just ending, the education service has supported more than 400 education establishments; welcomed 214 schools to Holyrood; visited 164 schools; and held online sessions for 59 schools. We have been in every constituency, with a good diversity of age ranges and education settings and reached into schools in areas of deprivation. We know the importance of the impact of visiting the Parliament, but travel is not the practical option or the highest priority for many schools, which is why we offer the digital and outreach services.

I hear, however, what the member has said about the UK Parliament, which the SPCB knows offers a travel subsidy based on distance from the building, starting at 30 miles. We are working with the UK Parliament to understand the impact that that subsidy has had on the profile of the schools that use the service. The policy intention that the SPCB will continue to address in the autumn is whether spending money on a travel subsidy will

help to achieve our public engagement goals in the most effective way, in line with the Scotland Act 1998. We are still reviewing and considering the position.

Pride Month

7. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what action it is taking to recognise pride month, including how it supports LGBTQ+ staff and visitors by ensuring that the Parliament remains a visibly inclusive environment. (S6O-03587)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body recognises the benefits that a diverse workforce can bring and takes immense pride in the values and culture of this Parliament by providing a positive, inclusive working environment where LGBTQ+ inclusion is embedded in everything that we do. As an employer, the corporate body takes an intersectional approach to diversity and inclusion to address the on-going legacy of historic prejudice and the continuing barriers to full inclusion. We will work in partnership with the recognised trade unions and LGBTQ+ staff to ensure that Parliament remains a visibly inclusive environment.

Finally, the commitment to LGBTQ+ staff members, visitors and the public is long standing and non-negotiable. As in previous years, the corporate body this morning agreed to a request to fly the progress flag this year to mark pride day in Edinburgh.

Patrick Harvie: I am delighted to hear about that decision regarding the progress pride flag.

I ask my question in the wake of the decision not so long ago to require Parliament staff not to wear rainbow lanyards—a decision that I regard as unnecessary and unhelpful. Members are still allowed to make that small, simple and utterly inoffensive gesture of inclusion and support. On the other hand, corporate body staff are not. Is the corporate body aware that, in the wake of that decision, some individuals who actively campaign against the equality and human rights of lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer people actively welcomed the decision? Is the corporate body troubled by that and does it recognise that it has a responsibility assertively to challenge such suggestions and to use pride month to reassert very clearly the inclusive nature of Parliament?

Jackson Carlaw: On that latter point, I agree with Mr Harvie. I hope that he will accept that my personal record on these matters is such that I would not be a party to a decision that was trying to promote the kind of conclusive outcome that some people might be trying to come to as a result of the decision.

However, political parties have political views; the institution of the Parliament does not. The Parliament is welcome, open and accessible to all visitors—it is rated as a five-star visitor attraction by VisitScotland and, in an assessment in June 2023, it scored 10 out of 10 for inclusivity—but it is important that people who visit the Parliament feel that the Parliament itself is not expressing any particular kind of view. That was the reason why the corporate body came to the position that it did. *[Jackson Carlaw has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8, if I could please have succinct questions and answers.

Temporary Staff (Process)

8. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether a simplified employment process could be introduced for temporary staff working for just two or three days, for reasons such as covering sickness. (S6O-03581)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I was caught off guard, Presiding Officer. I did not think that we would get to number 8.

The corporate body recognises that MSPs' staffing requirements can fluctuate over time in response to a range of circumstances. The SPCB seeks to operate arrangements that meet MSPs' needs, while ensuring that the provisions of the reimbursement of members' expenses scheme are met and that MSPs carry out their responsibilities as employers in accordance with employment law requirements.

John Mason: Sometimes, I employ somebody for just one or two days to cover, for example, a funeral, sickness, unexpected leave or jury duty. We are expected to have an 11-page contract issued and signed, which seems a little bit over the top.

Jackson Carlaw: I note the point that Mr Mason makes. If it is possible for people services to be given advance notice of the potential arrival of a very short-term employee, it can facilitate a discussion with the member about how that might be progressed.

However, where, in effect, the individual has been employed and we are notified of that after the event, there is a requirement for us to abide by employment law provisions. I know that Mr Mason is an assiduous attacker of bureaucracy in those regards but, unfortunately, it is nonetheless a bureaucracy that is required as a result of the employment law by which we are bound.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time. I apologise to the one member who I was simply unable to squeeze in. I did my best to get us through as many questions as possible.

There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change position should they so wish.

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

14:20

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio on this occasion is net zero and energy, and transport. As ever, members wishing to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Visitor Road Safety (Highlands and Islands)

1. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is informing tourists and other visitors of how to use roads across the Highlands and Islands safely. (S6O-03565)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): In 2019, Road Safety Scotland, Police Scotland and the British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association developed a campaign targeting people who are not familiar with driving on the left. Leaflets, wristbands and windscreen stickers were provided to car rental companies to distribute to foreign drivers hiring vehicles at airports across Scotland. We also offer advice to motorcyclists, as well as to drivers of caravans and motorhomes.

In 2023, after Covid, the campaign was relaunched, and resources were made available in tourist centres, airports and ferry ports, supported by signs with various messages. The driver wristbands say, "Drive on the left" in nine languages, and clutch reservoir gaiters saying, "Ride on the left" in eight languages were produced for motorcyclists. A short animated video for drivers to view in advance of picking up their vehicles was also created. Orders for materials can be made for distribution this year.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The potential risks of tourists and others who are unfamiliar with the A9 using the road are well known. Across the Highlands and Islands, we are seeing a proliferation of motorhomes, many of which are driven by people with no experience of driving one, nor of the difficult and too often pothole-ridden roads that they are driving on.

In Orkney and Shetland, there has been an increase in the number of visitors touring the islands on e-bikes that are provided by the cruise ships that they have just come off. Many of those people will not have ridden one before, and they are using roads that are simply not suitable for large slow-moving groups of cyclists, who are often more focused on the scenery than on the

road and other traffic. I have seen such groups, myself.

What concerns does the cabinet secretary have about the potential risks that those situations are creating? How can the Scottish Government support the police and local councils in addressing them?

Fiona Hyslop: Jamie Halcro Johnston has raised an important and serious issue in relation to unfamiliarity and different vehicles. The motorhomes that are being hired should be identified as a particular target for the campaign that I referred to.

On Jamie Halcro Johnston's point about e-bikes, I note that ferry ports, as well as airports, are important exit points to destinations, so upping the profile of the issues and the "Drive on the left" campaign in those contexts is important. I am also aware that, on some Loganair flights—I might not be correct about the airline—there is an announcement about the issue to people who are leaving the aircraft. Raising of the campaign's profile continues. We also support road safety through councils including Highland Council.

Ferries (Consultants)

2. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that it has spent nearly £6 million on consultants providing advice on the future of ferries. (S6O-03566)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): On complex and high-value projects, specialist advice is required to ensure that Scottish Government contracts fully meet policy objectives and legal requirements. That figure refers to work since 2015, which has included support from specialist technical, legal and financial external advisers, including those with expertise in the maritime sector, in their work both in Scotland and internationally. The work will help to ensure that we adhere to the relevant legislation, that we meet the needs of communities and that the appropriate ferries projects deliver value for money to the public purse.

Katy Clark: I understand that the latest award is of £250,000 to EY, but passengers and the workforce are in the dark as to what the work by consultants has achieved, to date. Will the cabinet secretary advise members on that and commit to a formal and regular structure of direct engagement with the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association and other CalMac Ferries unions on the case for a direct award? Will she outline the engagement that she is having with islanders? What more can be done to ensure that the voices of the workforce and islanders are heard in

decisions about the future structure of our ferry services?

Fiona Hyslop: The short answer is that I do, they are and we will. We regularly engage with the unions. I have a regular session specifically with the ferry unions, and a direct award has been the subject of discussions with them. Just as important, if not more important, is the detail of that. The content of the next award has been the subject of direct engagement between Transport Scotland officials and the unions. Similarly, we will report on consultation of islanders on the next award.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members wish to ask supplementaries. I will try to get them all in, but they will need to brief, as will the responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I was pleased to see that the new MV Loch Indaal was launched at the weekend. I look forward to its entering service next year.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that we could make more progress and deliver more investment in essential infrastructure, including our ferry fleet, if Scotland's capital budget had not been slashed by the Tories? Does she share my concern that, if Labour wins the election, far from providing more funds for Scotland, it will make further cuts that will hamper our ambition for ferries and other essential transport?

Fiona Hyslop: In recent years, we have delivered record levels of funding for ferry services and improved infrastructure. It was great to see the Loch Indaal being launched at the weekend.

Our planned investment is set out in the islands connectivity plan and in the vessels and ports plan, but it relies on significant uplifts in budgets, particularly in relation to capital. We know that the United Kingdom Government's spring budget fell far short of meeting Scotland's needs. We also know, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that Labour is planning to make cuts and that it would require cuts of up to £20 billion to be made by 2028.

We need the incoming UK Government to introduce an emergency budget to restore the £1.3 billion cut in Scotland's capital budget.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Would the cabinet secretary agree to allow a briefing—a private briefing, if necessary—to be provided by First Marine International on the benchmarking study that it carried out on the Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd shipyard and the investment that it would need to make it sufficiently competitive?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not responsible for Ferguson Marine, but I will relay that question to

the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic, who has the key responsibility in that area.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Has the Scottish Government hired consultants to look at the option of tunnels to replace ferries and, if it has, how much has been spent on that, to date?

Fiona Hyslop: Tunnels are part of the strategic transport projects review 2, and Beatrice Wishart will be aware that the Shetland task force is looking at various connectivity issues across the islands, including Shetland Islands Council ferry replacements and tunnels. There has been constructive engagement with the Shetland ferry replacement task force, which has been convened by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government.

In relation to the work by consultants that has been carried out for Shetland, we have agreed to look at any business development support that might be required in terms of planning. However, that is a broader answer to the specific question that Beatrice Wishart asked.

Rail Services (Ayr, Girvan and Stranraer)

3. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any economic and social impact of there being no rail services between Ayr, Girvan and Stranraer since the line was closed in September 2023. (S6O-03567)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I am very much aware of the impact that the closure of Ayr station has had on people who live and work in the area and travel to and from Ayr, Maybole, Girvan and Stranraer.

As Carol Mochan might be aware, the lead responsibility for Ayr station hotel rests with South Ayrshire Council, while Network Rail has responsibility for the railway station itself.

We share the concerns regarding the length of time that the works to secure the building have taken. That is due to the complex nature of the safety-related works which, as the investigative work developed, required that the southern extension and a large portion of the northern extension be demolished.

However, I am also pleased that, according to the latest advice from ScotRail, bus replacement services are operating well and that, from 17 June, ScotRail expects an Ayr to Glasgow electric service to be reinstated. I also understand that it is hoped that a full return to services, including to Maybole, Girvan, Barrhill and Stranraer, will be possible from mid-July.

Carol Mochan: I, too, welcome the news that we can expect services to resume in July. However, businesses and commuters in those

towns and the surrounding areas have suffered as a result of the disruption. A big problem has been the lack of affordable and reliable bus routes to pick up the strain when such events occur. Since 2007, more than 1,200 bus routes have been lost in Scotland and, in real terms, the cost of bus travel has increased.

A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research, "Wheels of change: Promoting fair and green transport in rural Scotland", has called on the Scottish Government to identify, fund and champion the anchor towns and communities that would provide public services and transport hubs for people who live in rural areas. What action has been taken in that regard?

Fiona Hyslop: I recognise that the fire that caused the disruption was not the responsibility of anybody but those who caused the fire, and that the consequences of that are being met by a load of different organisations.

Carol Mochan's point about how we can help with having anchor towns in relation to public sector transport modal shift is an interesting segue from rail, but I get it. That—ensuring that we support modal hubs for buses and trains—is the main focus of the work that we are trying to do with our transport strategy.

We have a deregulated bus system. This Government brought in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and the subsequent legislation to allow regional transport partnerships the choice to take different positions. However, as Carol Mochan will be aware, her party did not, when it was last in power, make any changes to the deregulated position, which means that there has to be partnership working with private bus companies, which are responsible for the vast majority of the services that are provided.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a brief supplementary from Sharon Dowey.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I also welcome the news that some rail services will return to Ayr station from 17 June, with services south to Maybole, Girvan and Stranraer expected to be operational in July.

The fire at Ayr station hotel has been devastating and has severely impacted local businesses and the community. Given that no service was in place for more than nine months, what measures can the Scottish Government take to encourage passengers back on to the tracks to visit towns in the south-west, thereby boosting the local economy?

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate Sharon Dowey's point, which was also raised by another member during First Minister's question time. We currently have a discounted proposition with the removal of

peak fares, which is to encourage people to use rail more generally, but Sharon Dowey makes the important point that we need to help in publicising and promoting the services in order to encourage more people to visit the south-west.

Road Safety (Local Authorities)

4. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it works with local authorities to promote road safety. (S6O-03568)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We are supporting our commitment to make Scotland's roads safe for all with a record £36 million investment in road safety in 2024-25 to reduce casualties and risks on our roads. That includes the road safety improvement fund, which each local authority can access to improve road safety on their networks.

The Scottish Government collaborates with all local authorities via our local partnership forums, which are part of the governance structure of the road safety framework to 2030, and various other road safety forums. Those forums give us the capability to improve communication between local and national levels.

Road Safety Scotland has developed a full suite of learning and resources for three to 18-year-olds, which is available on its website.

Clare Haughey: I frequently hear from constituents who are concerned about speeding across my Rutherglen constituency, including on Brownside Road in Cambuslang, which has seen numerous accidents over the years. However, more often than not, South Lanarkshire Council does not commit to implementing traffic calming measures.

Although prioritising areas for traffic calming is an operational matter for South Lanarkshire Council, can the cabinet secretary outline further how the Government engages with local authorities to ensure that they are doing what they can to improve road safety for pedestrians and other drivers?

Fiona Hyslop: Through our road safety framework to 2030 we aim to protect our vulnerable road users and achieve safer road travel in Scotland.

As I said in my initial answer, we engage local authorities through the local partnership forums and other road safety groups. Through the road safety improvement fund, we provide financial support as well as road collision data to allow local authorities to deliver evidence-led road safety initiatives to target overrepresented modes and users in their respective areas.

We also provide financial support for local authorities to deliver the 20mph speed limits as part of the national strategy.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): In May, I joined Living Streets, the United Kingdom charity for active travel that encourages children to walk through walk to school week.

Our roads are seen as too dangerous for many, with casualties on the roads increasing since 2020. Will the cabinet secretary outline what measures the Scottish Government is taking to increase road safety and promote active travel, and will she assure me that projects for Transport Scotland's road safety framework will be fully funded until 2030?

Fiona Hyslop: Road safety is a big concern of mine, which is why we have that record level of funding in the road safety and improvement budget. I think that, in his question, the member is referring to local roads. I am responsible for trunk roads and councils will be responsible for local roads. However, his point about active travel incorporating safety measures is well made. I will make sure that, as we take forward our active travel plans, road safety is embedded as part and parcel of what we deliver.

Electric Vehicle Charging Points

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its commitment to increase the number of electric vehicle charging points, particularly in rural areas. (S6O-03569)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government has invested more than £65 million in public EV charging since 2011. As a result of that and increasing private investment, Scotland has the best provision of public EV charging per head of any part of the United Kingdom except London, and the most rapid charge points of any part of the UK. We now have more than 5,000 public EV charging points and we are on target to hit 6,000 by 2026.

We are investing a further £30 million through our EV infrastructure fund and supporting local authorities to leverage private investment to continue to grow public EV charging, with funding specifically prioritising those areas of Scotland that are less likely to attract private investment in public charging points, including rural and island communities. Earlier this month, two EV infrastructure fund grants were issued to support continued growth of the public EV charging network across a number of local authority areas, and further grants are due to be issued during 2024.

Brian Whittle: The ability to use electric vehicles depends on the ability to access charging

points, which are more likely to be found in urban areas. To support our rural households, will the Scottish Government consider off-grid wind or solar-powered charging points in rural areas to avoid overburdening the grid?

Fiona Hyslop: That is an interesting point. I will ask my officials to look at what might be more self-sustaining in the provision of charging points. We welcome any innovative ideas on how we might roll out charging points all over Scotland, which is a big geographical area. For example, we have recently seen BT using green street cabinets as an innovative way of improving the range of charging points.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Alongside the private sector, local authorities have a key role to play in continuing to grow the EV charging network, especially in the many rural areas of Scotland that might otherwise struggle to attract commercial investment. Can the cabinet secretary advise what the Scottish Government is doing to support councils to play their part?

Fiona Hyslop: We have a clear partnership with local authorities. We provide the EV charging infrastructure fund that I mentioned in my first answer. It is expected that, this year, Scotland will benefit from up to £15 million of private sector investment in public EV charging, and our £30 million EV infrastructure fund encourages local authorities to collaborate in order to develop the scale of opportunity that can attract commercial investment. That is really important in order to develop provision across the country and support the skills, expertise and resources that will be needed. Local authorities are key partners in that work.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): When I visited Mowi in Rosyth a few months ago, I saw that it was installing quite a number of EV chargers. It explained to me that it intends to continue that process and hopes to open the charging points to the public. Does the Government see employers as having a key role here? If so, is it speaking to employer organisations, particularly in rural Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: That point is well made. The range and extent of EVs and, therefore, people's confidence in using them will depend on the charging network. Clearly, we want to encourage people to use public transport, but if people are still using cars to travel to work, particularly in more rural areas, it is important that employers can provide charging points. That, too, will be part of the programme, with private and public investment working together to create that extended reach.

Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (Highlands and Islands)

6. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it envisages that the recommendations of the second strategic transport projects review will benefit the people of the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-03570)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Government is committed to developing and maintaining a safe, resilient and sustainable transport network to connect our communities. STPR2 includes 37 recommendations, out of a total of 45, to improve connectivity for the people of the Highlands and Islands.

We are already investing in our ports and vessels for both the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services and the northern isles ferry services—the CHFS and NIFS networks. We are also enhancing active travel connections and we are improving the A83. In conjunction with other STPR2 recommendations, including an integrated transport plan for Fort William, those measures will collectively improve reliability, accessibility and travel choice for the Highlands and Islands.

Emma Roddick: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Fast, easy train journeys can play a huge part in getting people and freight off the roads. Can the cabinet secretary speak to the potential for rail infrastructure improvements across my region, the Highlands and Islands, particularly for the Highland main line, given its potential to reduce traffic and freight on the A9, where heavy loads can cause frustration and slower journeys?

Fiona Hyslop: Phase 1 of the Highland main line improvement project was delivered back in 2012, and that increased services from nine to 11 trains. The main part of that project, phase 2, was completed in March 2019, at a cost of £57 million. That included upgrades at Aviemore and Pitlochry stations for signalling, along with the extension of the passing loop at Aviemore and the reconfiguration and extension of the platforms at Pitlochry, which enabled the simultaneous arrival of trains at both those stations.

There are currently no active enhancement projects on the Highland main line, but officials at Transport Scotland continue to revise its programmes of work against the priorities in the context of the available funding.

20mph Speed Limits

7. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): [*Inaudible.*]—for 20mph speed limits.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms McNair, there was something wrong with your audio. Please repeat the question.

Marie McNair: Apologies, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress in implementing the national strategy for 20mph speed limits. (S6O-03571)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government remains committed to implementing 20mph speed limits on appropriate roads by the end of 2025, and we are making good progress towards meeting that timeline.

All councils have now submitted their assessment of which roads would be appropriate in their area for a speed limit of 20mph. A delivery sub-group consisting of officials from Transport Scotland, local authorities and other road safety partners will oversee the implementation of the scheme nationally and will produce a detailed programme of delivery to meet the 2025 deadline, containing the actual costs to complete that important road safety initiative. Highland Council is successfully piloting speed reductions, and communities that do not yet have 20mph speed limits are expressing interest in them.

Marie McNair: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I have been undertaking a road safety survey in the East Dunbartonshire part of my constituency. A common theme arising from the data has been the safety of cyclists on our roads. In part, that will be due to the tragic death of a cyclist in Bearsden North earlier in the year. Can the cabinet secretary advise what work the Scottish Government has done to encourage safe cycling and to promote greater respect for cyclists on our roads?

Fiona Hyslop: As part of our active travel behaviour change programme, we have provided grant funding to Cycling Scotland to run a number of cycle safety training projects, including bikeability cycling training for adults and cycle awareness training for professional drivers, including heavy goods vehicle drivers. We also provide funding to Cycling Scotland to run the “Give cycle space” advertising campaign, which raises awareness of the need for people in cars to behave appropriately when sharing the road with cyclists. “Give cycle space” continues to have a positive impact on driver behaviour, with nine in 10 drivers reporting that they had been taking positive action, including by leaving at least 1.5m of space when overtaking, as a result of the campaign.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The picture across Wales is now absolutely clear: its 20mph national roll-out has reduced casualties by a third. The Tories seem to

care very little about road safety, proposing a bill that would roll back on 20mph limits. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that there is no such rollback in Scotland, that funding will be there for councils to implement their plans next year and that, as part of that, a national communications plan will also be rolled out, learning from the Welsh experience of a 20mph national roll-out?

Fiona Hyslop: We will follow the Welsh experience, and indeed the three-month figures on road casualties, with interest. It is worth reminding everybody that, if someone is hit at 30mph, they are seven times more likely to die than at 20mph—so this is about road safety. We have to implement the policy a way that suits Scotland. We have got the plans in from local councils, and the communication of that will need to be part of it. I can reassure Mark Ruskell that I am absolutely committed to ensuring that our roads are safe, and I see 20mph limits as part of that safety campaign.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 has not been lodged, so that concludes portfolio questions on net zero and energy, and transport.

European Structural and Investment Funds

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Kate Forbes on European structural and investment funds. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:45

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Last week, there were various reports in the media about Scotland's use of European structural and investment funds. Those were inaccurate and misleading. My statement today will clarify the position as it stands now, and I will make a further statement once the programme has closed and the final calculations have been completed and published.

As I said in the chamber last week, neither I nor the Scottish Parliament information centre recognises the figures that have been quoted. Let me be clear about the latest position. The maximum amount allocated to Scotland by the European Commission for European structural and investment funds projects is €783.4 million, which is about £669 million. It is important to remember that the European Commission allocates and pays funding to member states in euros and we then allocate and spend funding on projects in sterling.

Sixty per cent of the allocations that the Scottish Government has made have been to local government. The rest was largely to public bodies such as NatureScot and Skills Development Scotland, which delivered excellent green infrastructure and skills training programmes respectively. The burden of implementing, delivering and agreeing the projects lies with our partners.

At every turn, we have encouraged our partners to spend their allocations of European Union funding and meet their delivery targets. Unfortunately, in some cases, projects contracted. For example, the number of participants in structural funds apprenticeship programmes was impacted by the pandemic in 2020, which was the final year of the European social fund. We also repeatedly asked all our partners to put forward new projects or to expand existing ones in order to maximise our use of the funds. Some proposed projects did not meet the European Commission's strict eligibility criteria.

It is important to note three things. First, the European Commission's requirements are very

stringent. Only a limited number of projects fit them, and the funding cannot be used for core services. Secondly, because match funding is required, it has not always been easy—especially for the third sector—to complete projects. Lastly, because partners have to commit the funding and then claim a refund from the Scottish Government, the European funding has not always been the first source of funding that our partners have opted to use.

Any suggestion that the European funding could have been used for any or all public expenditure—as I have heard in the chamber and might well hear shortly—simply is not accurate. The funding cannot relieve the pressure on day-to-day spending that is caused by austerity. It does not work in that way.

Many factors will influence the final outturn position, and it is simply misleading to forecast at this point what the final outturn position will be. I will set out three of the most influential factors when it comes to the final position.

First, as I said last week, the totality of eligible spending by partners and the total reimbursements that we receive back from the European Commission will not be finalised until the second half of 2025, when all the lengthy accounting and auditing procedures have been completed. The same is true for all parts of the United Kingdom. Indicative forecasts are not final figures, and each programme differs in purpose, scale and the way that it is administered. Comparisons with other parts of the UK are therefore spurious.

Secondly, the amount that is currently committed to projects across the country that were led by our partners—mostly local authorities—is £545.7 million. That expenditure was all incurred prior to December 2023. Those valuable projects, some of which I will describe later, have concluded, and the final expenditure claims have been submitted to the Scottish Government. My officials are currently verifying those claims against the European Commission's extremely stringent eligibility rules before making the final payments to our partners. Only once payments have been made can we claim the reimbursements from the European Commission, as we will do in July and October this year. That process is lengthy, and all payments are retrospective.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the European Commission has recently extended the final date for submitting reimbursement claims, and we intend to make use of that to ensure that absolutely every pound or euro that can be claimed will be claimed.

Our final reimbursement will now also include a contribution from the European Commission over and above the figures that I have already given. That money has recently been made available by the Commission to all member states, under the new flexible assistance for territories-cohesion's action for refugees in Europe—FAST-CARE—scheme, and it will be put towards the cost of housing and supporting Ukrainian refugees in Scotland, which the Scottish Government rightly shouldered. Once those figures are finalised, I will be happy to return to the Parliament to set out the details.

It is worth noting that previous funding cycles worked on a rolling basis, so we worked continuously with partners to identify projects. The difficulty is that this cycle is the last one and there is a hard stop. We are missing out on the current cycle, which runs from 2021 to 2027 and which our European partners are benefiting from, to the tune of millions of pounds-worth of euros, because we are no longer part of the European Union. Those millions of euros are very much focused on renewables and on research and development.

There are some other important clarifications. Our programme partners for European structural funds have always had access to the funding that they requested, as long as their projects were eligible. The Scottish Government has always paid out claims to partners that fully met the grant conditions and did so throughout at our own risk, because it was a retrospective programme, so we effectively provided millions of pounds of working capital to partners to deliver projects.

More than 240 projects right across Scotland have been supported through European structural and investment funding. Projects have helped to tackle poverty, including child poverty, and 18 local authorities have used the funds to assist vulnerable people, including parents, with financial and debt management advice, to ensure that they receive the benefits that they are entitled to and to assist them in securing housing.

Zero Waste Scotland has helped businesses up and down the country with much-needed advice and support to embed resource efficiency in their processes. For example, not far from here, Stewart Brewing was able to benefit from Zero Waste Scotland's advice, thanks to EU funding.

NatureScot's green infrastructure programme has created and enhanced more than 200 hectares of green space in urban areas, including 32 hectares of vacant land that have been brought back into use. In addition, NatureScot's natural and cultural heritage fund used European structural funds for 13 projects across the Highlands and Islands to promote the area's outstanding scenery, wildlife and culture. That included the redevelopment of the award-winning

Kilmartin museum, which reopened its doors last September with expanded exhibition and education space.

The smart cities project brought together our eight cities to share data and learning on how to adapt our cities for the future. Whether through solar-powered bins in Stirling, intelligent street lighting in Aberdeen or helping to set up the creative exchange, a new hub for the arts economy in Perth, the funding has helped to modernise the delivery of services to Scotland's citizens.

As the member for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch, I know how crucial that funding has been to the Highlands and Islands. The rural and veterinary innovation centre in Inverness, which was opened this March by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal, is a brand-new £12.5 million facility that is developing new links between science and industry to address planetary health challenges and grow the natural economy.

Following Brexit, the UK Government promised to deliver replacement funding. Its shared prosperity fund is piecemeal and does not compensate for the huge damage that has been inflicted on Scotland.

I am proud of the vast breadth of Scottish projects and programmes that have been supported by European structural funds. Projects have helped thousands of schoolchildren and young people on apprenticeship programmes to achieve their full potential and have provided electric vehicle charging points and active travel schemes to reduce carbon emissions in transport.

I will be delighted to report again to the Parliament in the coming months on the final financial outturn figures and the outcomes achieved, once the programme has formally closed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes, after which we will move to the next item of business.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful to the other political parties for supporting my request for a full statement from the Scottish Government about the allocation of EU funds to Scotland. We are talking about considerable sums of taxpayers' money, circumstances that have been shrouded in mystery and complexity for quite some time, and a Government whose record on fiscal transparency has attracted regular criticism from independent analysts.

With that in mind, and in relation to the Deputy First Minister's statement, I seek absolute clarity on the following points. First, she has stated that

the maximum amount that is allocated to Scotland is around £669 million. However, SPICe, in its extrapolation of EU data, said that the original amount that was available to Scotland was £801 million. Is the Deputy First Minister 100 per cent confident that her figure of £669 million is correct? If it is, where is the difference between that figure and SPICe's £801 million?

Secondly, can the Deputy First Minister clarify what sum has already been handed back to the EU because it was not spent by the December 2023 deadline as a result of projects failing to meet EU regulations for the disbursement of those funds? On page 2 of her written statement, the Deputy First Minister says that she will return to the Parliament to provide the final figures. When will that happen, so that we can enhance the scrutiny of that figure?

Kate Forbes: I will start with the last question. In the light of the formalised deadline being the middle of 2025, if it suits the Parliament, I am more than happy to come back with an interim update, but I imagine that the Parliament would be more interested in the final outturn figures. I propose to do that when the deadline for formal reimbursement of the figures has passed.

On the difference between the figures—this is where it gets slightly complicated, because of the euro and the pound—if it is okay with Liz Smith, I will talk about the euro, because that is probably easier to verify. I talked about the European Commission's allocation being €783.4 million. We should bear it in mind that that is essentially an upper limit. It is not a pot of funding that we would then seek to spend in full; it is an upper limit of funding that we can get reimbursement from. Liz Smith is right in saying that the original figure was €941 million prior to 2014. The upper limit allocation has incrementally reduced since 2014 for a host of reasons, some of which have to do with projects that have contracted. I mentioned the example of apprenticeship programmes that young people were not able to participate in due to Covid. There are other examples, such as initiatives to deal with poverty for which match funding has not been found. If Liz Smith will forgive the analogy, the total sum must be viewed as a credit card limit that is provided by the European Union, which we cannot go over and above. Our aim is to spend as much of it as possible.

On Liz Smith's question about what has already been handed back, I have been clear about the two different upper limits and I was trying to be clear in my statement that I cannot give a final outturn figure just now. I listed three points. The first sum, which is what has been incurred up to December 2023, was £545.7 million. However, we are now in the business of working with the

European Commission to claim additional funding over and above that for the flexible assistance for territories-cohesion's action for refugees in Europe—FAST-CARE—scheme for Ukrainian refugees, so it is likely that that figure will be higher.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to have slightly briefer responses, Deputy First Minister.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I appreciate the clarification. As per the statement, it is simply not the case that the maximum amount allocated was €783.4 million. The amount that was allocated in the original budget was €941 million, and, by its own admission, the Scottish National Party Government has lost €157.6 million. It told SPICe that that was due to Scotland

“failing to meet the annual expenditure targets”.

The system to disburse the money is designed by this Government. There is no justification for blaming local government for failing to spend the money when the system was devised by this Government.

Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that, as at 3 June, the unclaimed portion of Scotland's funds sat at 46.5 per cent? Can she tell us whether any other Government in Europe has managed to get itself in such a state? Can she tell us how many times we have been suspended from the scheme? Finally, will she confirm that the absolute minimum loss to Scotland's communities, due to our Government's incompetence, sits today at €294 million?

Kate Forbes: There were a lot of questions in that—most of which were based on a premise that is not accurate and is not backed up by the facts.

On undercommitment and underutilisation, I mentioned the three reasons why partners have not always been able to spend the money. First, the scheme is retrospective. That is not by our design but by that of the European Commission. Partners must spend, then claim back. That is just a fact. Partners have not always been able to do that.

Secondly, the money must be match funded. There are no two ways about it. Over the past few years, things have been extremely difficult. Match funding has been most acutely difficult for the third sector.

The last reason is the complexity of the regulations and the heavy bureaucracy. At the end of the day, we have spent—often at our own risk—to reimburse partners for what they have spent, but we must then claim reimbursement from the European Commission. We work very hard to ensure that the money that we spend will meet the European Commission's strict eligibility criteria.

However, it is well known that a lot of those projects struggle at times to meet those eligibility criteria, because they must be over and above core services.

Because you are staring at me, Presiding Officer, I will come to a conclusion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am glad that that message is getting across.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): EU structural funds, which have been eradicated by the travesty that is Brexit, have made a real difference across the country—helping more people into work and delivering new skills through better training and support. Can the Deputy First Minister give any examples of how EU structural funds have benefited Scotland in that way?

Kate Forbes: We have been part of those funds for more than 40 years, and thousands of people in communities and businesses have benefited. Although, clearly, the Scottish Parliament was not established over that full 40 years, we have a 40-year track record of knowing how to operate those schemes and distribute from them. Many people have benefited from a vast range of projects on skills, employability and training, which have been delivered through a wide variety of Scottish organisations and institutions. Local authorities, the third sector, skills agencies, universities and colleges have all benefited from funding. Stuart McMillan has made an important point: that funding is no longer available, and those institutions can no longer benefit from the current cycle.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary stated that the European Commission has extended the final dates for claims. It seems to me that the Scottish Government's ability to seek reimbursement for unallocated funds comes more through luck than by design. Would it not have been much more effective to have prepared and submitted claims within the original timetable?

Kate Forbes: We have done so.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The complexity that is associated with how EU structural funds are allocated—in particular, the match funding that is delivered through third-party agencies and is often overseen by local authorities—is not commonly understood. There has been complexity through Covid impacts and changed audit processes before final outturn figures could be finalised. We all hope that as much money as possible can be spent, but the real loss is surely that of the EU funds themselves. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that any replacement funds from the UK Government will not match the value of EU structural funds, despite

claims that they would do so? Indeed, there is an anticipated shortfall to Scotland of £337 million over the next three years.

Kate Forbes: Theoretically, EU funding has been replaced by the UK's structural funds. In the first round, the UK Government allocated £212 million to Scotland over a three-year period, whereas EU funding would have been worth around £549 million over three years. If we are talking about a comparison, the difference between those two figures is clear. That will have an impact on projects that might have benefited.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): If I heard the cabinet secretary correctly, there is a float available for allocation, potentially by the end of this month, of €136.4 million; that leaves 18 days to maximise the allocation. An example that might be useful to the cabinet secretary is the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, which has a current funding gap of between £7 million and £15 million. The very solvency of that theatre company is at risk because the money that it currently has will be expended by the end of this month. If funds are allocated, they could be spent by the end of the year to get the theatre project back on track. Is that an example that we could investigate? The project is already mobilised, so funds could be used immediately, and that could help to maximise the utilisation of the funding.

Kate Forbes: I acknowledge Paul Sweeney's efforts to look at initiatives that could be funded. I go back to the three points that I made at the beginning. First, the project would have to meet criteria that are not ours but those of the European Commission.

Secondly, delivery is retrospective, so funding would have to be distributed initially by a third party, which would claim reimbursement from the Scottish Government, which would then claim reimbursement from the European Commission.

The last point is that the funding would have to be matched. We are currently engaging with the European Commission on additional funding for Ukrainian refugees. The Scottish Government has—rightly—paid up front for resettling Ukrainian refugees and is currently engaged with retrospective reimbursement from the European Commission. That is our focus just now, because the deadlines for new projects have probably passed.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): In her statement, the Deputy First Minister mentioned the UK replacement funds for European funding, and Michelle Thomson asked about the level of those funds. Has the UK Government been working in partnership with the Scottish Government in that regard, and has it focused the funds on the neediest areas?

Kate Forbes: Not to my knowledge—the answer on both counts is no.

We have benefited from EU structural funding for 40 years on a rolling basis, and our partners are currently benefiting to the tune of millions of euros for renewables and research and development. We are not seeing the same impact from any UK levelling-up or structural funding.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Building on the same point, amid the complexity, it seems that the one clear and simple thing is the value of the European structural funds in relation to both the amount of money and the amount of control that Scotland had over how to use it.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that an incoming UK Government next month must be under immediate pressure to ensure that both the level of investment and the level of control for Scotland over its replacement funding is at least as good as it would have been if Scotland had got what we voted for and remained in the EU?

Kate Forbes: I absolutely agree. When I was looking at the detail behind my statement, it was with some incredulity that I realised that our partners, including local government and the third sector, are missing out on millions of euros of funding, which is not being replaced by the UK Government, and it does not appear that it will be getting replaced under either of the manifestos that are being debated in the run-up to the general election. Patrick Harvie is absolutely right that our partners could be benefiting but they are not. I wonder at the crocodile tears that we see about this initiative when, actually, it is the last in a 40-year cycle of funding, and that merits a lot more grief.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Under the EU's 2014 to 2020 budget, Scotland was allocated up to €941 million in structural funding. Can the Deputy First Minister illustrate what was achieved in Scotland through that funding before the Westminster parties decided that we should be taken out of Europe?

Kate Forbes: Strategic skills programmes over the past 17 years include graduate, modern and foundation apprenticeships, which have benefited thousands of Scotland's young people. Since 2007, European structural funds have helped 320,000 people in Scotland to overcome barriers to employment, and provided extensive funding for research and innovation for Scotland's universities, including the technology and innovation centre at the University of Strathclyde. Support was provided to 360,000 small businesses to increase their business competitiveness, resulting in the creation of thousands of jobs. The galling thing is that our

European partners are still benefiting from those things.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): In her statement, the Deputy First Minister mentioned the Ukrainian refugee support scheme—the FAST-CARE scheme. Reports suggest that the European Commission has offered that money and that it has been taken by countries—it has not been accounted for in the way that the Deputy First Minister outlined to Parliament. Will she confirm whether that money was not taken or was paid back? When will that money be accounted for? It is not quite clear from her statement how that will be achieved.

Kate Forbes: I ask members to please hear what I am saying about this: the funding is allocated on a by-unit basis. For example, the Scottish Government has fully met the costs of resettling Ukrainian refugees. That is a Scottish Government budget line, and rightly so. We then engage with the European Commission, and the European Commission reimburses us on a per-refugee, per-month basis. It feels dreadful to put it like that, because it reduces people, but I hope that members understand what I am trying to say. That is over and above the £545.7 million figure that I already provided. That is why I say that we will spend, to the last pound if we can, the full allocation under the upper limit that has been set for us.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Will the Deputy First Minister say a bit more on the cumulative impact of EU funding on my constituents in Dundee and on communities across Scotland since the UK's accession in 1973? What is Scotland now missing out on due to the absence of that funding?

Kate Forbes: In Dundee, and across Scotland, since the 1970s, Scotland has received more than £5.6 billion of economic investment from the EU. That is quite a remarkable figure. If memory serves me, that figure is bigger than our capital programme entirely on an annual basis.

Over the 40 years that Scotland has been part of the European funding programme, thousands of people, communities and businesses in Dundee and elsewhere have benefited from a vast range of projects. We are now missing out on those extensive opportunities for collaboration. This is the first cycle since the 1970s that Scotland has not been part of, which is a matter of sorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the ministerial statement. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Public Service Investment

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-13602, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland's public services. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

15:13

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Investing in our public services to ensure that they are effective and sustainable is central to delivering the Scottish Government's priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing our economy and tackling the climate emergency. However, our ability to deliver that is choked by austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis—the simple ABC of Westminster holding Scotland back.

For the past 14 years, we have endured Westminster austerity, which has been an impediment to the delivery of effective public services by curtailing investment in our front-line services. We have seen Brexit forced on the people of Scotland expressly against their democratic will. Brexit has taken the legs out from under economic growth. That has meant that we must work even harder to help Scotland's economy with the powers that we have, which means that business and our vital public services have had to work harder to fill vacancies and supplement local skills.

The cost of living crisis was created by the Tories and exacerbated by Liz Truss, with members on the Tory benches demanding that we follow her budget. Not content with that damage, the Conservatives' current spending plans will see nearly £20 billion of cuts, and they want to go further—in their manifesto, they have another £17 billion of tax cuts.

By the looks of it, that is set to be continued by Labour, a party that boasts about sticking to the Tory spending plans, no matter the cost to people. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has clearly laid out the choice that Labour needs to make, with the IFS deputy director saying:

“Unless they get lucky on growth, they would either have to do more on tax rises that they haven't told us about, or they would have to deliver cuts to the public services that have already been hit by the austerity of the 2010s.”

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary accept that, if growth in this country had stayed as it was when Labour was last in government, we would have tens of billions

of pounds more to spend on public services than we do now?

Shona Robison: I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that, by many indicators, the Scottish economy is performing better. If we look at the recent Royal Bank of Scotland report, we see that the Scottish economy is the stand-out performer of the United Kingdom. There is much to be commended about Scottish economic performance, but there is work to do. The issue that we have with migration and the labour needs of our businesses and industry relates to the point that I just made about Brexit and the harm that it is doing.

I turn to some newspaper reports that have been generated by senior Labour insiders' admissions that a Labour Government would make "really difficult" and "pretty unappealing" cuts. Therefore, I think that there is a real issue with Labour not being straight with the Scottish people. Labour calling for more money for local government in its amendment to today's motion cannot be reconciled with the cuts for local government that are being signalled by a future UK Labour Government. That is a fundamentally dishonest position to take, and it cannot be sustained.

I know that the financial situation remains incredibly challenging, but the Scottish Government will continue to prioritise spending effectively in order to ensure that our public services remain sustainable. For example, the medium-term outlook for our capital budget is particularly difficult. The latest forecasts show that our capital block grant is expected to reduce by almost 9 per cent in real terms between 2023-24 and 2027-28. That is a cumulative loss of more than £1.3 billion that we are not able to invest across Scotland to support our public services to remain efficient and effective.

Quite simply, if the incoming UK Government does not reverse the cuts to capital and deliver a meaningful uplift for investment in public infrastructure, it will have to explain why it has laid a path to greater austerity than the Conservatives caused. Without that change, there will be a significant impact on the capital investment programme.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary is calling on others to reflect. Has she reflected on her time as health secretary and on the £20 million cut to drug and alcohol partnerships and the drug deaths crisis that we see, or on the £200 million cut to the housing budget while she was Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government? Where is the Scottish National Party taking responsibility for problems in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give the cabinet secretary the time back for the intervention.

Shona Robison: On the housing budget specifically, it is not just the capital cut that we are wrestling with; it is the more than 60 per cent cut to financial transactions. I know that Miles Briggs knows that the financial transactions funding is what underpins the affordable housing supply programme. We cannot have a 60 per cent cut in FTs from the UK Government without that impacting the programme that it funds. We need a reversal of the capital cut and the cut to financial transactions, and that is what we will be pressing for.

The Scottish Government has consistently and proudly prioritised investment in public services and we will continue to do so. Despite the challenging financial situation, we are continuing to take bold and ambitious action to protect and improve our public services wherever possible.

We are using all the powers that are available to us under the current devolution settlement in order to maximise our investment in public services to benefit the people of Scotland. For example, we believe that those with the broadest shoulders should be asked to contribute a little more, and our progressive approach to taxation is central to our investment in public services. That approach delivers £1.5 billion in additional funding to protect our services. Given its opposition to progressive taxation, the simple fact is that, were Labour sitting in our seats right now, it would be delivering £1.5 billion of cuts to Scotland's public services.

I am proud of the Scottish Government's legacy of investing in and reforming Scotland's public services over many years. Across the education and skills sector, we are continuing to invest around £1 billion each year in 1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare. Scotland already has the most generous childcare offer for three and four-year-olds in the UK, and we also make those hours available to the two-year-olds who need it most.

In our health and social care sector, we are working to reduce in-patient and day-case waiting lists by an estimated 100,000 patients over the next three years, with planned investment each year to deliver that improvement to such a critical public service. That comes on top of £19.5 billion of investment in health and social care. In our justice sector, we are investing £1.55 billion in policing in 2024-25, which demonstrates our commitment to keeping people and our communities safe.

The Government has spent around £1.2 billion to mitigate the impacts of 14 years of UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and

the benefit cap. That includes almost £134 million this year alone through activities such as our discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund. That £134 million could have been spent on our public services—as an example, it would pay for more than 2,500 nurses each year if we did not have to mitigate Westminster austerity.

We have also invested £2.9 billion in 2023-24 across a range of programmes that are targeted at low-income households, which all drive forward our mission to eradicate child poverty. That includes awarding almost £430 million to families through our Scottish child payment, with more than 329,000 children benefiting from the payment—worth £26.70 per child per week since the end of March this year—which is literally keeping food on families' tables.

Again, with Westminster policies, we have had one arm tied behind our back. One of the quickest interventions that the next UK Government could make is to lift the two-child benefit cap. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that ending the two-child limit

“would lift around 300,000 children out of poverty”

across the UK and 10,000 children in Scotland overnight. Labour is, of course, refusing to do that. The cost to scrap the two-child cap across the UK would be £2.5 billion this year; the cost of keeping Trident is more than £3 billion. That is the choice that Labour is making: it is choosing to prioritise billions in nuclear weapons over eradicating child poverty. That is the simple truth of the matter, which is why I will not be supporting the Conservative or Labour amendments today.

The fact that the Labour amendment would delete a line in our motion that says that we are committed to “high-quality services” and that we welcome

“that public sector pay is higher”

—a line that not even the Conservatives seek to delete—really says it all. I wonder what our trade union colleagues would think about that.

If the proposed Green amendment had been selected, however, I would have supported it, as I believe that reform of the council tax is needed. I am committed to making progress on the matter, on a cross-party basis if we can. The joint working group on council tax will continue to operate, chaired by me, and will next meet later this summer after the pre-election period that has meant that work needed to be paused. At that meeting, it is my intention that the group consider the plans for taking forward the council tax deliberative engagement to conclude before the 2026 Holyrood election. I recognise the issues raised in the proposed Green amendment, which

will need to be discussed as part of any reform of the council tax.

As I bring my remarks to a close, it is right that I recognise the invaluable role of Scotland's public sector workforce, which is the backbone of our society. They do much to deliver public services with kindness, dignity and compassion. I am proud of our approach to public sector pay in recent years. That approach means that, on average, people in key public sector roles in Scotland are now paid 6 per cent more than those in such roles in the rest of the UK. We should remember, however, that the gap in public sector pay between the Scottish Government and the UK Government is a political choice by the outgoing UK Government. What remains to be seen is the political choice that any new incoming Labour Government makes.

For as long as the Scottish Government remains on an effectively fixed budget under the current devolution settlement, there are limits to what we can achieve in investment in public services. However, we will continue to do all that we can to invest in our public services. That is the vision of this Government. It is a shame that other parties do not share that vision and, instead, want to continue the plans that have brought us austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's continued investment in public services and shares its commitment to maintaining high-quality services that people in Scotland need; recognises the key role that the workforce plays in delivering public services and welcomes that public sector pay is higher in Scotland than other parts of the UK; acknowledges the importance of a socially just and progressive approach to public service design and delivery, underpinned by fair work and a progressive tax policy; agrees that the UK Spring Budget fell far short of what Scotland needs to deliver further investment in public services and infrastructure, and will result in a cut in the Scottish core block grant of around £0.4 billion in real terms in 2024-25 compared with 2022-23; is concerned that significant, real-terms spending cuts, assessed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies as being up to £20 billion by 2028 across the UK, will be needed as a result of the economic plans of either a Labour or Conservative UK administration; calls on the incoming UK administration to bring forward an emergency budget to restore the £1.3 billion cut in Scotland's capital budget, and notes that, for as long as the Scottish Government remains on a fixed budget under the current devolution settlement, there are limits to what it can achieve in terms of investment in public services.

15:26

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Members will know that, earlier this week, the Finance and Public Administration Committee announced its latest inquiry, to investigate the Scottish Government's fiscal strategy and its approach to taxation and the use of capital for

innovation and growth, and to analyse what progress has been made in public sector reform, all of which are important when it comes to the debate about investing in our public services.

The demand for that committee inquiry has come about partly because of on-going concerns that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has raised when presenting its objective data on the current state of public finances, partly because of concerns from Audit Scotland about the lack of effective leadership in some aspects of Scottish Government policy, and partly because of the committee's concerns about the lack of transparency that, too often, clouds the decision-making process here in Holyrood. All of that is set against the current UK economy, where there have been major issues resulting from high inflation, high interest rates and high mortgage rates.

There is an important and, indeed, urgent need to consider how we stimulate investment and, therefore, better protection for our public services. Ask many people across the economy and they will say that they want economic stability, prudent fiscal management, lower taxation and closer alignment of Scottish taxation with UK taxation, well-maintained infrastructure, fewer barriers to trade and a strong emphasis on training and skills. The huge issue for the Scottish Government, however, is that, despite its higher tax rates—and not just for those in higher-income groups—the public is not seeing any improvement in their public services. In other words, they are paying more and getting less. That is an uncomfortable fact—

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will do so in a minute.

That is an uncomfortable fact, because some people in the Scottish National Party ranks know full well that it cannot continue. If we are going to continue to argue for a higher tax burden, the taxpayer will want something much better in return. That has not happened with educational standards, NHS waiting lists, weak infrastructure—including housing—potholes, ferries or an overstretched police force. That is because the Scottish Government has not placed nearly enough emphasis on economic growth, especially during the Bute house agreement period, when one of the ministers did not actually agree with economic growth in the first place. Perhaps Mr Greer might like to intervene now.

Ross Greer: To be clear, there are many parts of Scotland's economy that the Greens want to see grow, most obviously the renewable energy sector. We supported the growth of those parts of the economy during our time in government.

The point that I was going to make is that Liz Smith mentioned that people across the country want lower taxation. I am sure that, if all else was equal, that would be the case, but poll after poll has shown that the vast majority of people in Scotland are willing to pay more tax if that money is invested in our public services. That shows the strong commitment to the social contract in this country. Does Liz Smith acknowledge that the Conservatives are vastly out of line with public opinion on that?

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

Liz Smith: I definitely do not acknowledge that. If we listen to many people who are running businesses and operating in the economy in Scotland, the last thing that they want now is a higher tax burden and higher tax differentials with the rest of the UK. I am afraid that I do not accept what the member says at all.

There are some green shoots of recovery, such as inward investment in green energy and the life sciences, but the general trend for business and industry—as spelled out in blunt terms—is pretty depressing.

At the start of my speech, I cited the factors that business and industry want to see in order to be confident about the future, and business and industry has sent a very strong message back to the Scottish Government, both privately and publicly. As Neil Gray announced earlier in the session, when he was Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, the new deal for business has not been working well enough.

Another serious challenge relates to local government. The Scottish Government certainly does not need me to tell it that the mood in local government is fractious. There were high hopes for the Verity house agreement, but that was blown apart by the Government's failure to engage with local government, whether on the council tax freeze or the question of multiyear budget funding—we still have not had an answer on that—and by the years of underfunding.

On top of that, we have seen an unhelpful stand-off on the UK Government levelling-up money, which many councils have greatly welcomed but which the Scottish Government seems to have a permanent problem with. The tensions between the Scottish Government and local authorities are not helpful and neither is the tension between the UK Government and Holyrood, because, in this age of deep mistrust in politics, the general public wants to see different levels of government working together.

Let me address the important issue of capital budgets. We know from economic analysts,

particularly those who have presented to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, that there was a cut in real terms to UK Government budgets. I acknowledged that at the time of the UK Government budget. More could have been done to protect infrastructure and investment, which, as the *Financial Times* pointed out, has been weak not only in Scotland but in the UK.

However, it would be helpful if we could have an acknowledgement from the Scottish Government that the block grant is at its highest level ever—the recent Fraser of Allander Institute analysis makes that abundantly clear—and that it has additional ability to increase its capital borrowing, thanks to the fiscal framework that the cabinet secretary signed alongside the UK Government. Let us not forget that the current failures in the Scottish economy are largely due to Scottish Government policy choices.

Shona Robison: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will do so in a minute.

It is simply not credible to blame everything on Westminster. I have noticed that that point has been made in many of the TV debates about the general election, which I know that I cannot comment further on, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Shona Robison: I mentioned earlier some of the strengths of the Scottish economy. Will Liz Smith recognise that she is not speaking from a strong position? Office for National Statistics figures have shown that the UK economy flatlined in April—there was zero growth—with the UK Government apparently blaming the rain at one point. Can Liz Smith really stand there and criticise the Scottish economy's performance when the UK economy has been so poor? I understand the need for economic growth, but Liz Smith can surely welcome the RBS report showing that Scotland is a stand-out performer in the UK economy.

Liz Smith: The UK economy has not been doing as well as it should be. My point is that the Scottish economy has been progressing even less well, and that has come about because of the choices that have been made right here in Holyrood, not down in Westminster. I simply do not think that it will wash to say that it is always Westminster's fault.

Miles Briggs: It is a broken record.

Liz Smith: It just goes on and on, and, as my colleague has just reminded me, it is a broken record. It will not wash with the public, because it is not correct.

Our public services are a vital cog in the wheel of a more prosperous society, but it is not enough to throw more and more money at them, because

history shows that doing so does not improve them. We need a restructured economy and a new tax structure—I am glad to hear that the cabinet secretary is making some progress with her commission; we need to ensure that Scotland is the best place for economic innovation and entrepreneurship; and we need to remove the barriers that businesses persistently claim are holding them back. I finish my remarks on that. Can we raise the game in the things that we can do to make Scotland a first-class economy in which to invest?

I move amendment S6M-13602.1, to leave out from “acknowledges” to end and insert:

“notes that, in so many areas of devolved public services in Scotland such as education, health, local government, housing and justice, there has been a marked deterioration in the services provided over the last 17 years; acknowledges that Scotland is now the most highly taxed part of the UK and that people are paying more yet getting less from their public services; is concerned that, despite the Scottish Government receiving a record block grant, the failure of the New Deal for Business and the Scottish Government's lack of emphasis on economic growth have contributed to a very challenging fiscal environment, and calls on the Scottish Government to put in place economic policies that will reform the public sector, improve skills and training, reduce the tax burden and foster new investment and growth opportunities across the economy.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mark Griffin, who joins us remotely.

15:34

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): At the outset, I apologise to the chamber for not being on the front bench and for participating remotely. I tested positive for Covid this morning, so I am sure that colleagues would much rather that I participate via a screen than in the chamber, where I would have been sharing much more than my opinions.

Five billion pounds—£5,000 million—is the amount of public money that the SNP has wasted since it took office. That amounts to nearly £300 million for each of the 17 years that the SNP Government has been in office. On European Union funding alone, despite the SNP's claims to the contrary, it is clear that millions will go unspent and unallocated. Those figures are just the latest example of the Government's financial incompetence.

That financial incompetence is not just bad management; it is a betrayal of every Scot who relies on or works in our vital public services. The truth of the matter is that the SNP, along with the Tories, wants us to vote for and accept failing public services and a struggling economy, but we deserve better. We want change, because every institution in Scotland has been left weaker by the SNP, and nowhere is that clearer than in our NHS.

On this Government's watch, our NHS—the finest achievement of a Labour Government—has been allowed to crumble. With an overstretched workforce and an ever-growing patient waiting list, bold changes are required. Here are some shocking numbers from our NHS: more than £1.6 billion has been used on agency spending and £1.3 billion has been lost to delayed discharge. That chaos absolutely has to stop.

Kate Forbes criticised Humza Yousaf for sticking with the same failing strategies, but nothing has changed since John Swinney became First Minister. In fact, John Swinney and his deputy have been responsible for more than half of this Parliament's budgets—they have been responsible for 13 of the SNP's 17 budgets. They have had oversight of the vast majority of this Government's financial mismanagement.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Mark Griffin: I will take an intervention from Ms Adam.

Karen Adam: I thank the member for taking an intervention. Does he truly believe that a Tory austerity agenda, a Tory Brexit and a Tory cost of living crisis have had no impact at all on our national health service?

Mark Griffin: It is clear that they have had an impact. We have had 14 years of Tory chaos, but we have also had 17 years of SNP mismanagement, which have left the NHS in the state that it is in. That is why the general election is a chance to take the first step along the road to change—the first step along the road to delivering an NHS that is fit for the people who rely on it.

I want to touch on local government, which is one of the key delivery partners of our vital public services. Since 2013-14, the SNP has cut more than £6 billion from our local councils. Bins are overflowing, potholes are not filled and libraries and sports facilities are being forced to close. Those cuts are hurting every day. Our local authorities desperately need support, partnership and proper funding but, instead, they get the gimmick of a council tax freeze handed down to them by a Scottish Government and funding that does not cover it.

Those are hard facts that members will not hear from the Government today. Local government core revenue has been cut by £62.7 million and the core capital budget has been cut by £54.9 million. Between 2011 and 2021, funding for parks and open spaces was cut by more than £365 million, library funding was cut by almost £260 million and street cleaning was cut by more than £320 million. Councils face a budget gap of up to £585 million this year, which will rise to £780 million by 2026-27.

Shona Robison: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Mark Griffin: I will take an intervention from the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: I thank Mark Griffin for taking an intervention, and I hope that he feels better soon.

According to a briefing that was provided to the newspapers this morning, non-protected areas of spending, which include courts, prisons, local government, jobcentres, the police and immigration services, would be cut under a Labour UK Government. Can Mark Griffin give us a categorical assurance that that will not happen?

Mark Griffin: I do not listen to off-the-record briefings, and I would advise the cabinet secretary not to either. The Labour manifesto has been published and I am sure that she will have a good read of it and see the kind of change that we will be delivering for the whole of the UK and, I hope, in Scotland in 2026.

Right now, there are more than 1,500 fewer secondary teachers than in 2007. Some areas have been hit harder than others. In my area of North Lanarkshire, there are 211 fewer teachers. Dumfries and Galloway has 204 fewer teachers. Dundee City has 154 fewer teachers. We cannot keep going on like this. It is not only those who use those vital services who are suffering; those who provide the services are also feeling the brunt of the chaos and incompetence of two failing Governments.

Public sector workers do invaluable work for our communities, and the Scottish Government must urgently provide clarity to public sector bodies, unions and workers regarding its future plans for the public sector workforce. It is by working in true partnership with our public services workforce, growing our economy and investing in our public services that we will begin to reverse the decline of the past 17 years.

That is what Scottish Labour will do. Under a UK Labour Government, we will grow Scotland's economy, create jobs and bring new opportunities. We will renew our public services after years of mismanagement. We will close tax loopholes to fund the NHS and tackle the mental health crisis with real funding increases. We will put forward a true NHS recovery plan that values staff and promotes health. We will prioritise the delivery of economic growth in all parts of the country to create jobs, boost incomes, reduce poverty and allow for greater investment in and, crucially, reform of our public services. We will reverse the abject decline in local government funding.

It is time for change that revitalises our public services and puts the needs of the public first. The man who delivered his first budget in 2007 cannot

deliver that change. Scottish Labour will deliver the change that we need.

I move amendment S6M-13602.2, to leave out from first “welcomes” to end and insert:

“recognises that communities across Scotland are being failed by the Scottish National Party (SNP) administration’s approach to reform and funding of Scotland’s public services; notes that there are significant issues across Scotland’s vital public services, including in the NHS, education, local government and housing, and that these issues are having a real impact on inequality; understands that the SNP has consistently failed to deliver the reform that Scotland’s public services have desperately needed over the last 17 years; recognises that funding for local authorities has been cut by a cumulative total of over £6 billion since 2014, resulting in local authorities across Scotland being forced to make difficult decisions on the provision of essential services in order to make ends meet; understands that the NHS is particularly impacted by the SNP’s failure to deliver reform, with £1.3 billion spent on delayed discharge since the Scottish Government committed to eradicate it, and millions spent every year on agency staff; recognises the invaluable contribution of Scotland’s public sector workers, who deliver the services that people rely on in challenging circumstances; believes that improving the terms and conditions of workers across the public sector is essential, especially in areas such as social care; understands that financial mismanagement and a failure to deliver economic growth has resulted in less money being generated for investment in public services; recognises the role that technology can play in improving public services, and calls on the Scottish Government to prioritise economic growth to boost wages and create jobs in all parts of Scotland, as well as financial competence and transparency to ensure that all taxpayer money is used effectively and towards delivering the support and reform that Scotland’s public services desperately need.”

15:42

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am glad that we are having this debate this afternoon, although I am a bit frustrated that we are not having a debate dedicated to the fiscal sustainability of Scotland’s public finances, and that we will not have the medium-term financial strategy, the capital spending strategy or the tax strategy before autumn. That is disappointing and frustrating.

Scotland’s public finances are not sustainable without huge changes to our tax policy, significant cuts to public services, or some combination thereof. The Parliament’s Finance and Public Administration Committee has been trying to get both Government and Parliament as a whole to engage with the issue, because it is becoming more urgent. Short-term decision making to balance budgets in year is consistently resulting in poor value for money for the taxpayer.

I had some involvement in two rounds of the euphemistically named “path to balance” exercise to close the Government’s in-year budget deficit. That was difficult work, resolving the tension between the financial reality and the

consequences that would come about from reducing spending on important services. I do not envy the ministers and officials who have to deal with that every year.

However, one specific concern that I have about how we go about closing the in-year budget deficit each year is that certain portfolios are bearing a disproportionate burden—specifically, the education portfolio. If we compare justice and education, we see that, for obvious reasons, the justice portfolio spending allocation is largely fixed at the start of the year. There is not much flexibility once we have made those commitments, whereas in education there is more nominally discretionary spending.

When we have gone through a pattern—for reasons outwith the Scottish Government’s control—of in-year deficits, year after year, it means that the portfolios with that discretionary spending have had to bear a really disproportionate burden to close the deficit.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Ross Greer: Not at this point, Mr Whittle; I am sorry.

I am not suggesting that no action has been taken by the Government to address the fiscal sustainability challenge. Government ministers are absolutely right to highlight the additional £1.5 billion that we have available to spend each year on public services because of the progressive changes to income tax that have been made since 2017. That is the result of changes that were tabled, from opposition and from within government, by the Scottish Greens.

I ask those who have opposed those measures throughout the past six years to compare the doomsday predictions that they have made with the reality. Overall tax take in Scotland from income tax is up, and inward migration from the rest of the UK to Scotland is also up.

I think that that is because higher-quality public services are a pull factor. On the point of debate that I raised with Liz Smith a few minutes ago, I have just checked the numbers. Only 9 per cent of people in Scotland want lower taxes and less spending; 43 per cent are prepared to pay more to fund public services. The most recent British social attitudes survey shows very similar UK-wide figures.

Liz Smith: I very much agree with the member’s initial remarks about transparency. Does he accept, however, that many businesses in Scotland are finding it difficult to attract highly skilled workers because of our higher tax and the differential between Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Ross Greer: I do not accept that. I accept that businesses in Scotland are finding acute labour shortages across the board. One of the most significant contributions to that is Brexit and the immigration policies of the UK Government.

However, the past six years of income tax change in Scotland reveal how misleading Labour's claims are. There is apparently "no magic money tree", to quote the Labour Party's social media accounts and front-bench spokespeople, but if a UK Government was to replicate Scotland's income tax system UK-wide, it would generate more than £11 billion of additional revenue for our public services every year. That is enough to abolish the two-child cap seven times over. Labour needs to be honest. It is making a choice to keep the two-child cap on child benefit in place and a choice to keep 250,000 children in poverty, and it should be straight with the British public about that.

The same Labour Party is demanding billions of pounds in extra spending here in Scotland, but earlier this year it voted against raising extra revenue from the top 5 per cent of earners. That is not how maths works. We cannot spend more with less money. The Conservatives have at least listed some areas of public spending in Scotland that they would cut. I disagree with every example that they gave apart from one, which Liz Smith and I can discuss later. However, they have shown an honesty that is lacking on the part of the Labour Party in this debate. If it opposes more revenue raising, it needs to put savings proposals on the table.

For example, I think that the small business bonus scheme represents poor value for money. Small businesses should receive tax breaks and tax incentives but, as the Fraser of Allander Institute found, the way in which we structure the SBBS at the moment means that it has no measurable positive impact. There are savings to be made there, and restructuring would also help genuinely small businesses.

On capital, the Scottish Greens believe that we are still spending too much on road expansion compared with road maintenance and other capital priorities.

I am proud of the progress that we have made and that the Scottish Greens have been involved with, in recent years, in areas such as the devolution of empty property relief, greater council tax discretion in relation to second and holiday homes, and the visitor levy that Parliament legislated on a couple of weeks ago, as well as the commitments that we secured to further work such as the cruise ship levy, the public health levy and the general power of competence. So many of our public services in Scotland are delivered by local government, but it does not have nearly enough

financial discretion of its own, certainly compared with the norm across Europe.

As the cabinet secretary referenced, the Greens' proposed amendment looked specifically at council tax and the reality that we are still basing a tax system on property valuations from 1991. I held it off for as long as I could, but I turned 30 earlier this month and I am younger than the council tax valuation. It has not been in date in my lifetime. I cannot imagine that anybody in this Parliament would tolerate a situation where most people in Scotland paid the wrong rate of income tax, yet the majority of households pay the wrong rate of council tax because the valuations are so out of date.

Reform is clearly needed—reform to our tax system and to our public services—so that we can ensure greater value for money for the public. However, we will not get that reform unless we have an honest debate about what the trade-offs are and unless we are all honest about how we would make the money add up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate.

15:48

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): When I think of public services, as I did when I was writing this speech, I automatically thought—as I am sure many others do—of the support that they provide us with throughout our lives, from the cradle to the grave, often caring for and supporting us when we most need it. In particular, I thought about our national health service. In my remarks, I will focus principally on that institution, which gave me my first opportunity to serve the public, delivered my six children and two grandchildren, took care of my relatives before they passed away and, on so many occasions throughout my life, has taken care of me and my family in our hours of need. I know that I am far from being alone in feeling gratitude for and pride in the NHS. It is a manifestation of our collective commitment to one other and it embodies the values of compassion, solidarity and care.

The Scottish people look to us to provide investment in the NHS: not only investment in monetary terms but investment in the fundamental belief in the institution itself. Many people who stand at a ballot box are looking to vote for the NHS and to see a party dedicated to the protection of it. That is a marker of our society, and it goes beyond ensuring that every person in Scotland has access to the care and support that they need; it is a matter of ensuring that the NHS is there for future generations, too, delivering services when we are no longer here.

I am proud to support an SNP Scottish Government that is committed to improving Scotland's public services, particularly our NHS, not as a cost but as a vital investment in our future health, equality and prosperity. Proof of that investment comes in the form of an NHS workforce in Scotland that is currently the highest paid in the UK. Scotland has had the best-performing core accident and emergency units in the UK for nine years. NHS funding has more than doubled, and we have the highest number of general practitioners per head in the UK.

As a consequence of the SNP Government's decisions, £1.5 billion is available to spend on public services in Scotland today that would not be available had the Government not taken the decisions that it has taken on tax. A socially just and progressive approach to public service investment, design and delivery is essential, and that must be underpinned by fair work and a progressive tax policy. That approach ensures that everyone contributes their fair share to the funding of services that benefit all of us. It is about creating a society in which everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

However, the challenges that we face are significant. Nobody is turning a blind eye to that, but the UK spring budget fell far short of what Scotland needs to deliver further investment in public services and infrastructure. That has resulted in a cut in the Scottish core block grant of around £400 million in real terms for 2024-25 compared with 2022-23. Such cuts hinder our ability to make the necessary investments in our public services. To me, that does not signify a priority on the part of the UK Government to deliver for our NHS. Therefore, I support the Scottish Government's call on the incoming UK Administration to hold an emergency budget to restore the £1.3 billion cut in Scotland's capital budget. For as long as the Scottish Government remains on a fixed budget under the current devolution settlement, there are limits to what we can achieve in terms of investment in public services. It is imperative that we have the resources that are needed to support them effectively.

Despite those challenges, people in Scotland currently benefit from policies that are not available in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. They support Scots who are struggling after 14 years of austerity cuts, through measures such as free tuition fees, free prescriptions, free personal care, the Scottish child payment and the mitigation of the bedroom tax. That shows an SNP Scottish Government proving that it prioritises its citizens.

My grandmother was a domestic supervisor at the Royal Cornhill hospital in Aberdeen. Alongside her worked my mother and my auntie. My

grandmother had a reputation as a white-glove type, ensuring the highest standards of cleanliness and care. That pride in working for the NHS was a badge of honour in my family. I did a turn as an NHS domestic at Aberdeen royal infirmary, and I remember the pride that my family felt when I started working there. It was celebrated. Before my first late-night shift, my grandmother cooked me a special tea to sustain me, making sure that I was fit for a job that she held in high regard. It was a fulfilling and rewarding job, and one of great importance.

Public services are the core of our society. They represent our collective commitment to care for one another, and we have a deep regard for and pride in them. By investing in those services we invest in the future of Scotland, which is exactly what the SNP Scottish Government is doing.

15:54

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I start by apologising to the Parliament. With the Presiding Officer's approval, I am being allowed to leave the debate 15 minutes early to attend an event that I would rather not be attending—but I have to.

I am pleased to be speaking in this afternoon's debate about the provision of services, because the provision of services is not just the provision of things that we need so much such as education or healthcare from the national health service; it also includes the provision of other really important services across Scotland, such as transport services, which is another pet subject of mine.

Very sadly, we have heard today that somebody died on the A9 last night. I am sad to report that there has been another accident just this afternoon, at approximately 12.30 at Dalwhinnie. I have not heard whether that has resulted in a fatality, but I pray that it has not.

We would not be in this situation if the A9 had been dualled when it was said that it would be dualled. I am sure that I do not need to remind the Government that, on 6 December 2011, it announced that it would dual the roads between all of Scotland's major cities, including the A9 and the A96. I think that Alex Neil was put on the bridge at Luncarty on 6 June 2012 to reannounce that. He did what many Governments do—he reannounced good news. The trouble is that the good news stopped there.

We have not got to the stage of the A9 being dualled. In fact, we found out only this year that it would not be dualled by 2025, which is when we were promised it would be dualled by. It was quite clear from the evidence that a previous First Minister—Nicola Sturgeon—knew in 2017 that that delivery was never going to happen. It is sad that it

did not happen at that stage for the simple reason that money was available. That was before Covid and before any austerity, which the cabinet secretary believes she can blame for her failures. I do not believe that that is the case. If we had done that in 2017, none of those things would have been issues.

It is also sad that, when I quizzed Nicola Sturgeon about why that had not been done and whether she understood what Alex Salmond had said when he was First Minister, she commented that she was not sure whether he and she were in the same Cabinet. If they had been in the same team, which they claimed to be, I am sure that the A9 and the A96 would have been dualled.

That has had a knock-on effect on all the other transport services across Scotland. We can consider the buses—do not forget that we are spending nearly £300 million on concessionary bus travel across Scotland. Where does that actually get us? A person can get a bus from Thurso to Inverness and a bus back from Inverness to Thurso on the same day, but they can spend only three hours in Inverness—that is all the time that they can spend there. That is all that that allows a person to do. All the money that we are spending on concessionary bus travel is not really helpful for young people or older people coming to Inverness, because they will not have time to do anything when they get there. The question is: is the bus concessionary travel scheme working just for the central belt, or does it need to be expanded to ensure that there are sufficient buses across the Highlands so that everyone can benefit?

Let us consider the trains. We are spending approximately £1.3 billion a year on a train service that we have nationalised, and we have seen the services reduced. If I do not leave the Parliament before decision time to ensure that I get a train back to Aberdeen at 5.30—that is not why I am leaving tonight—there is a fair chance that, unless the train is delayed by 10 minutes, I will not get home until tomorrow. That is a strange position to be in.

If a person was travelling from Inverness to Edinburgh, for example, they could leave at 5 o'clock in the morning and get here for 9.30, but that would not really be in time to start work at the Parliament—I know that most MSPs start before then—and they would have to leave much earlier in the evening, before work had finished, to get back to Inverness.

I was amazed to find that, if a person wanted to go from Wick to Inverness, they would have about three hours to spend in Inverness before they had to get the next bus back. Things get more complicated than that. If a person wanted to get a train back to Wick, they would not even have time

to go to a show in the evening. They would have to rely on getting a train across to Wick to go to the cinema, because all the services in Inverness do not work.

Are the trains working? Is that £1.3 billion working in the Highlands? I question that.

I have to come to the ferries. They are probably the biggest white elephant that I have ever seen in my life. We agreed to pay £97 million for them. So far, we have spent £300 million. I do not think that the Government is prepared to guarantee that the Glen Sannox will be finished and released from the shipyard at the end of next month—or maybe it is. I do not think that it can do so, because I do not think that the Glen Sannox will be ready. I think that another delay is coming down the track. Four ferries from the CalMac Ferries fleet are not servicing the islands. That is a critical loss to them.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): How does Mr Mountain think that those who use the A9, the A96 or any other pothole-ridden road in the Highlands and Islands, or those who face ferries that do not work—such as the one on the Corran Narrows, which we had real issues with last year—or who rely on any other transport, will feel when they see members of the SNP Government patting themselves on the back for their service delivery in the Highlands?

Edward Mountain: Mr Halcro Johnston knows as well as I do that the people of the Highlands feel that that is the forgotten part of Scotland and that the central belt gets the investment. An exceptional amount of money was invested in the railway line between Glasgow and Edinburgh, resulting in journey times being cut by 20 minutes. In the time that it took to do that, journey times from Perth to Inverness increased by 20 minutes, which is a disgrace.

I think that I might be out of time. Our health and education services are not the only critical services; there must also be services for people to get around Scotland. This Government has badly let people down in that regard.

16:01

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): In this 25th year of devolution, there is an opportunity to reflect together on what has been achieved and to consider what we must do to meet the challenges of the 21st century and achieve what we want to in the next 25, 50 or 75 years.

Context matters. Our collective challenges are complex and our problems are difficult. In communities such as the one that I have the privilege of representing, many of those

challenges lead back to things that happened in the 1980s.

The first years of devolution, when I was a lad, were a time of plenty, and perhaps more could have been done. Let us not forget that the Labour Party of that time was also guilty of spending money on things that should not have been priorities, such as the £9 billion that was spent on an illegal war in Iraq.

In 2007, things changed in a number of ways. The SNP came to power for the first time, and the financial crisis happened. That should be remembered, because, since that crash happened, there have been self-inflicted harms caused by Westminster Governments: austerity, Brexit and the Liz Truss Government, particularly its budget. External factors, such as the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have also had an impact. Since the 2010 Government of David Cameron, significant mistakes have caused extreme difficulty and have made Britain, as the Resolution Foundation has said, a poorer country with a very few rich people in it.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Is the member aware that the UK economy has made the slowest recovery from the 2008 crash of all advanced economies and that that is highly indicative of macroeconomic issues?

Ben Macpherson: Absolutely. The Westminster Government's austerity policies have not only created social damage and had a negative impact on our public services; they have had a consequential negative impact on our economic performance.

It is therefore remarkable, in my opinion, that the Scottish Government has delivered such progress in the period since the 2007 financial crisis. I could say a lot about that, but let us think only about the journey of a young person living in Scotland, rather than in the rest of the UK.

A young person who is born in Scotland can benefit from everything in a baby box. If they are eligible, they get best start grants. Their family will get more support with childcare. If their family requires it, the Scottish child payment is available. There are free prescriptions if they need them because of ill health. There is free transport to access education, employment and leisure. There is a 90 per cent chance or above that they will go on to a positive destination. There is free tuition at further and higher education institutions. There is more social housing per head of population than elsewhere on these islands. There are safer streets on which to walk around. There are better wages in the public sector. I could say more.

Yes, things have not been perfect, but the state of our public services and the quality of life in Scotland are better because of the Scottish

Government. Part of that has been a result of progressive tax policy, but I agree that we need to go further on that. I am glad that a commitment has been made on continued reform of council tax.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the member recognise that the Barnett formula and the record block grant allow for higher public spending in Scotland?

Ben Macpherson: It is right that the Scottish taxpayer benefits from the amount that is allocated for public spending in Scotland because of how much our wonderful country contributes and how strong our economy is.

What is a tragedy is that public spending in England is not what it should be because of bad choices by Conservative Governments. There is more to do, and in the months ahead I look forward to hearing what more the Scottish Government will seek to deliver for the people whom we represent. The £0.4 billion real-terms reduction in our budget this year is making that more challenging, as well as the fact that, under either Prime Minister who is on offer in the coming election, it is projected that there will be between £18 billion and £20 billion in cuts to public investment. I cannot believe that the Labour Party is proposing that it will bring about change when it is going to inflict on us billions of pounds-worth of public sector cuts. That sounds as though it is short change to me.

It is clear to me, having looked through its manifesto, that the Labour Party is not interested in offering any more powers to the Scottish Parliament. Anyone who wants the Parliament to continue to evolve and to become even more capable of delivering for the people of Scotland should know that the Labour Party is not offering any more powers.

16:07

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to our public service workforce who, in the past few years, have dealt with so much—the people in our NHS who put themselves at risk and treated people while many of us stayed at home during lockdown; our police force, who do a difficult job to keep us safe; our fire service, which saves lives every day; and all those whose roles are not public facing, yet they remain vitally important, all the same. It is unfortunate that many people in the sector spend so much time working harder to achieve less, in trying to cope with the consequences of the repeated underinvestment and chronic mismanagement that we have seen from the SNP Government.

I hear from constituents every week examples of our public services suffering from underinvestment, as does everyone in the

chamber. We hear from people who are stuck on waiting lists for vital operations, whose lives are on hold.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way?

Foysoyl Choudhury: I have a lot to get through. I will give way in a minute.

Just this week, I heard from a constituent who has been diagnosed with prostate cancer. He was told that his tumour is growing, but there is an eight-month wait for surgery and he has no idea when his treatment will start. He is living in fear for his health and is confused about when he will get help.

His experience is far from unique—in the past year, the number of Scots waiting more than a year for treatment has risen by a fifth, to almost 88,000 people. While that happens, £1.3 billion has been wasted on delayed discharges and £1.6 billion has been wasted on agency spending. The SNP is leaving Scottish taxpayers to be let down by the service that is supposed to be there for them in their time of greatest need.

Issues of underfunding are being seen in all our services. Ultimately, the public pay the price. That is clearest in our local authorities. Last month, it was found in an Accounts Commission report that Scottish councils have a budget gap of more than £0.5 billion for the year 2024-25. That is staggering. It represents millions of pounds of cuts to essential public services that the public rely on almost every day—more charges for bins, parking charges, less money for social care and less money for pools or for schools. It is shocking that the SNP decries Westminster austerity while constantly ignoring the concern that is raised by our local authorities about funding of their public services.

For Scotland and the United Kingdom to thrive, we must have economic growth. Our wish to pursue social justice and fund public services sustainably must be met with economic growth to create jobs and boost wages, but the SNP has not been able to deliver the necessary change. The people of Scotland deserve better. Labour market trends data shows that, in Scotland, economic inactivity is higher, unemployment is higher and the growth of pay is slower than they are in the rest of the UK. Rather than having a laser focus on growth, on raising funds for public services and on creating jobs, the SNP would prefer to cover up its shortfall by raising taxes on nurses.

The Scottish people have been let down on two fronts—by the Tories in Westminster, who caused chaos through Liz Truss's fantasy economics, and by the SNP, which has poured fuel on that fire through mismanagement and waste. The people of Scotland need new leadership that will prioritise growth, reduce poverty and allow for greater

investment in and reform of our public services. People in Scotland need change and new leadership—which they will get with Labour in Scotland and at Westminster.

Shona Robison: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Foysoyl Choudhury should correct the record. He has given factual inaccuracies in his speech about a number of things, but the one that jumps out is that he said that public sector workers in Scotland are paid less than those in the rest of the UK. On average, they are paid 6 per cent—£1,500—more than public sector workers elsewhere in the UK.

It is really important that there is accuracy in the chamber, so I hope that Foysoyl Choudhury will correct the record on that point. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I perhaps reply to the cabinet secretary, Mr Halcro Johnston. Thank you.

That was not a point of order. Everybody in the chamber is well aware of how the record can be corrected. The point that the cabinet secretary has made is now on the record.

16:14

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am pleased to support the SNP motion, but I am also pleased to place under scrutiny the wild claims that have been made by the Tories and Labour alike. I have listened to the debate: those parties are singing from the same hymn sheet, but they also appear to be consulting the same economic witch doctor.

The Tories used to claim that conservatism brought political, social and economic stability, but over the past 10 years they have given us five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors of the Exchequer and 12 plans for growth. At the same time, their policies have caused harm to society and the economy—not least via Brexit. The chaos that was created by the Boris Johnson and Liz Truss premierships displayed a remarkable degree of incompetence, and Scotland continues to pay the price. Frankly, the Tories deserve to be dispatched to the dustbin of history.

Then, along comes Labour, claiming to be the party of change. If Labour was genuinely interested in pursuing change for the better, it would seek to reverse Brexit. Instead, the party is silent on that, which is an act of political cowardice. The fiscal package of tax rises and spending pledges that the Labour Party announced today equates to around 0.2 per cent of gross domestic product, so I will listen to no claims about what the Labour Party is going to do for public services.

In recent times, Keir Starmer, Rachel Reeves and David Lammy have commented about who they claim were the great change leaders of the past. Rather than Clement Attlee, who oversaw the creation of the NHS, or Harold Wilson, who introduced the Open University, they trumpet none other than Margaret Thatcher—that destroyer of communities, who did not even believe in society.

Both the Tory and Labour manifestos claim that they will raise more funds by closing tax loopholes, thereby collecting billions of pounds. However, they cannot spell out how that will be done—I am happy to take an intervention on that point—and neither are they willing to tackle the vastly overcomplicated tax system in the UK, which is full of exploitable loopholes. Similarly, the Tories and Labour claim that they will immediately save lots of money by pursuing productivity gains in, for example, the NHS. That is fantasy land stuff.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that we are in for another dose of austerity if Labour comes to power. We need only listen to Rachel Reeves’s commitment to current Tory policy. As recently as March this year, speaking at the Bayes Business School, she unveiled Labour thinking and emphasised stability of a particular sort. Most critically, she aims to keep the fiscal rule that, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out, is the greatest bind on policy—the need to have debt falling as a share of national income. The IFS and others have also pointed out that the rule is a completely arbitrary invention of the current Government. Not only will Labour keep the Tory rule, but it is determined to ensure that it binds the Labour Government, too. In the words of Rachel Reeves,

“debt must be falling as a share of the economy”.

She went on to say:

“I will end the practice of the Chancellor being able to scrap the rules at any time”.

She is supposed to make the rules, not follow the Tory ones.

In case there was any doubt, that is one of the main reasons why many bodies have pointed to the coming of significant cuts—a minimum of £18 billion—under Labour, which Labour has now admitted. I point out to members and to the ladies and gentlemen who are watching the debate that that is just the starting figure. Labour is not only putting on a Tory straitjacket—it is going to tighten the Labour belt.

Let us consider the practical implications. Earlier this year, Labour’s Wes Streeting, writing in *The Sun*, vowed to fight “middle-class lefties” who oppose expanding the NHS’s use of private healthcare. He wants to expand the invasion of privatised healthcare. Streeting has accepted around £175,000 from two donors with links to

private healthcare firms, so it is perhaps not surprising that Labour has dropped its “NHS not for sale” commitment. In the past two years, private equity firms have struck 150 deals for UK healthcare companies, according to figures that have been reported by the *Financial Times* and cited in *The Guardian*. Those firms have bought up ambulance fleets, eye care clinics and diagnostics companies. As Hettie O’Brien from *The Guardian* rightly concluded in an article last August,

“When asked how he would deal with the NHS crisis, shadow health secretary Wes Streeting echoed his Conservative counterparts and pledged to use private companies to reduce waiting lists. For investors, it was a show of support. For patients, it’s a worrying indication that our politicians have little intention of arresting the decline of our public health service.”

The implications go beyond those that have been cited by Hettie O’Brien. If new investment in England and Wales is undertaken using that privatisation model, there will be no Barnett consequential. That is one more example of how our public services in Scotland are just as much at risk with Labour as they are with the Tories. The only way to protect our public services in Scotland is by securing our independence as soon as possible.

16:20

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): One of the benefits of being in the middle of an election campaign is that we politicians get to ask our constituents every waking hour what is really important to them in their daily lives. More often than not, the answers bear little resemblance to what we debate in the chamber. I am sure that I am not the only MSP who constantly hears about potholes, difficulty in getting a GP appointment, waits to access treatment in the NHS, a lack of places at university for indigenous Scots, cuts to further education places and a lack of investment in transport infrastructure, and—yes—the issue of tax differentials is increasingly being raised on the doorstep.

Unfortunately and predictably, the Scottish Government has doubled down and relied increasingly on its fallback position of “It’s not us, it’s them”. Interestingly, it is very noticeable that that excuse is increasingly wearing thin with the public.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Of course we take responsibility for the performance of our public services. We have taken the decision to increase taxation for those who can best pay it so that we can invest in those public services. However, Brian Whittle must be honest with his constituents when he talks about challenges in our public services. If his

plans were followed, we would see less investment in our public services, such as the NHS, and those who access them would face even greater challenges. Why will he not be honest with the people of Scotland about the impact that Tory plans would have on our public services?

Brian Whittle: Listening to that intervention, which I am very grateful for, we realise why the SNP has failed for the past 17 years. It has failed to invest in our public services. It is frustrating that so much could be achieved and should have been achieved; instead, there are many examples, as we have just heard, that point to the SNP's addiction to pop politics and headline grabbing, to the detriment of delivering outcomes.

For example, the Scottish Government is very fond of the phrase "record funding for our health service", yet it has failed to explain why we have the worst health outcomes. Throughout the time that the SNP has been in office, Scotland has had the worst health record of any European country, from the scandalous rise in drug and alcohol deaths to lower life expectancy, which is still reducing. For the first time in history, children born in Scotland have a lower life expectancy than their parents.

Scotland is one of the most obese countries in the world. We have higher levels of cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, as well as a record number of people suffering from poor mental health. Our poor health record leads to higher levels of economic inactivity, which in turn has a negative impact on our economy.

I remember the pledge by the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, that improving education would be the SNP's primary target, yet we see declining standards against international tables, a huge reduction in FE places and a cut to the budget for apprenticeships, which are essential to our green economy potential and the just transition that is so often talked about.

There are universities that are increasingly reliant on foreign student income to make the books balance, to the detriment of indigenous Scottish students, who increasingly find it difficult to access university places, especially for critical careers such as medicine. We need more doctors, yet some Scots with the qualifications to study medicine are being denied that opportunity.

It does not have to be that way. I am slightly concerned that I am about to agree with a point that Ross Greer made, which does not happen very often. We need a long-term strategy that focuses on the problems that we are trying to solve. Integrating approaches across portfolios is the solution—

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Brian Whittle: Not just now.

We must understand that investment in certain areas impacts others. For example, our poor health record is the biggest drag on our economic performance, as I have said. The focus has relentlessly been put on getting more finance into the health service and recruiting more healthcare professionals to try to match the increasing need, instead of taking a step back and recognising that we must address the other side of the coin: how do we reduce the need, and how do we get better at retaining staff? Those are more difficult issues to tackle, and they will require a longer-term view.

I advocate that the main solution to our poor health record relies on what the SNP used to declare as its focus, which is investment in our educational environment. The issues that we need to tackle in our schools are poor physical and mental health, behaviour, attainment and, in some cases, hunger and malnutrition—the latter of which is, of course, not necessarily related to hunger. We need to allow our kids into school prior to the school day. I think that an offer of some activity, along with an offer of a healthy breakfast, would be a significant move towards tackling the real issues.

We are chronically short of the engineers and tradesmen and tradeswomen needed for the transition to the green economy, yet the Scottish Government is underfunding the further education sector and cutting apprenticeship places. In what world does that make any sense? All that the Scottish Government is doing with that is ensuring that we will not meet its climate change targets. We will not be able to take full advantage of the opportunities for our economy that the growth in the green economy offers. Of course, the Scottish Government will then rely on its built-in excuse of it being the UK Government's fault.

One of the solutions to the problem of our overstretched healthcare workers is to develop a better environment for them to work in by freeing them for as much time as possible to deliver the healthcare that they are trained to provide instead of bogging them down in administration. We have so many strengths in Scotland in artificial intelligence and life sciences. Why do we not utilise them to change the healthcare environment?

I realise that I must come to the end of my speech. There are solutions, if only the Scottish Government would lift its head above the parapet just for a moment. Outcomes are what matter. When we invest in education, we invest in health, justice, the economy and welfare. I am afraid that

that somehow does not filter through to the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Ross Greer to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

16:27

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will start by picking up where I finished my previous remarks on local government finance reform. I thank the cabinet secretary for indicating the Government's support for what was in the Greens' proposed amendment and for making the point that there should be a cross-party effort on local government finance reform. I definitely welcome those remarks.

If I have picked up correctly what the cabinet secretary has said, the work that will be advanced over the remainder of this year will include the commitment that was made earlier this year to consider a power of general competence for local government. Perhaps the front bench could confirm whether I have picked that up correctly. I see the cabinet secretary nodding; I will take that as confirmation that I have understood that correctly.

I think that that power would be genuinely transformational for local government. The challenge in Scotland is that we have a tier of government that we refer to as "local government", but it is not particularly local. The 32 authorities are massive by the standards of European local government, and they cannot do very much governing, either. Giving them a power of general competence would be one critical step towards them having genuine power to govern in their local areas.

Bearing in mind that my previous remarks focused a lot on the success that we have had with progressive income tax, the Greens absolutely recognise that additional funds for public services cannot come just from increasing individual tax liability. That is why, during our time in Government, we pushed for the reintroduction of a public health levy and for the carbon emissions land tax.

On the public health levy, I highlight the point that Scotland has introduced minimum unit pricing for alcohol, quite rightly for public health reasons. However, as it stands, minimum unit pricing without a public health levy actually increases the profits of supermarkets. Considering that Parliament has, quite rightly, agreed to increase the minimum unit price, I think that a public health levy would be a very effective step to take alongside that to allow the additional revenue that is being raised and is currently going into the pockets of supermarkets to instead be directed

into the health service, and particularly into addiction recovery services.

The Poverty Alliance, Oxfam and others recently challenged the First Minister on the point that Scotland is already a wealthy country. In fact, the amount of wealth in this country has grown considerably in recent years, but it is hugely unequally held. That is why the Scottish Greens are campaigning for a wealth tax on the top 1 per cent—those with assets of about £3.5 million and above. People in that category have only got richer—much richer—in recent years, while everybody else has been struggling during the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. If the model wealth tax that we proposed, based on a paper from the University of Greenwich, were applied UK-wide, it would generate at least £70 billion a year. That is the estimate if we assume a very high rate of avoidance; if we assume a figure from the lower end of the range of avoidance estimates, it could be up to £130 billion a year.

These debates about our public finances are fundamentally about honesty, because they are about how we can afford things. The block grant in Scotland has not come close to keeping up with inflation and pay demands in recent years. We need to face up to the fact that we must either cut or radically reform services to generate savings, or raise additional revenue from elsewhere. We cannot continue to go on as we are, and the onus, as I said earlier, is on everybody to call for more spending to engage in that financial reality. I commend the Scottish Trades Union Congress's paper from late last year as a good place to start.

However, I do not want to neglect the need for public sector reform. I am a fan of a big state; I think that government should be the expression of the popular will of society. It is where we share power and resources and where we can do transformational things together, especially to protect our most vulnerable neighbours and this planet. There are huge challenges, such as the deeply embedded inequality in the UK and the climate crisis, which require a big, co-ordinated response—the kind of response that only Government and the state can lead the delivery of. I want to see a bigger state in Scotland and to see it do more to meet the needs of people and the planet. However, I do not want just what we have now, but on a bigger scale. We need far more efficient and accountable public service provision.

I want to highlight a reform success story from recent years, which is that of Screen Scotland within Creative Scotland. It has had a transformational impact. Believe it or not—given what colleagues have said earlier—there are areas of the Scottish economy that the Greens really want to see grow and that we are proud to

have played a role in growing. One of those areas is our film and TV industry.

Ten years ago, our film and TV professionals were embarrassed by the state of the sector and the lack of support that it received. We now have world-class studios, which are booked out and turn business away. From 2019 to 2021, the value of film and TV in our economy doubled. The sector is employing record numbers of people in a vast range of roles and our international reputation is rapidly growing—the team at Screen Scotland has been absolutely critical to that. It is passionate about what it does, has an excellent relationship with the sector and has a clear purpose.

Screen Scotland is a relatively new part of our public sector landscape. I still believe that the team needs to be separate from Creative Scotland, but what has been achieved in recent years is a blueprint for other areas of public sector reform that could generate considerable economic return for Scotland overall.

Ben Macpherson: I agree with everything that Mr Greer has said. Would he like me to help to organise a visit to the fairly new film studio in Leith to see more of those excellent achievements?

Ross Greer: A cross-party parliamentary field trip to the film studio in Leith is exactly what we need during an election campaign to foster a bit of cross-party co-operation.

The film studio in Leith is the centrepiece of Screen Scotland's success, because it was critical to securing it. It is consistently booked out with world-class productions at the moment. We should be really proud of that.

I will make a few additional points. The first is about sharing data in the public sector. The David Hume Institute has made it clear that there is a huge economic loss in Scotland from the lack of availability of public sector data, to the tune of about £2 billion every year. We can achieve much more there.

There are plenty of additional points that I would like to make, particularly around NHS reform, but having looked at the clock, I will simply say that we need to regularly make more time for debates to explore public sector reform and the management of our public finances. It is a key topic that cuts across every portfolio area and affects the lives of everyone in Scotland. I hope that this afternoon can be the start of a more constructive cross-party discussion.

16:33

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate for Scottish Labour, because the value of public services cannot be overstated. Like Karen Adam,

Michelle Thomson, Brian Whittle, Edward Mountain, Foyso Choudhury and, I am sure, many others across the chamber, I recognise the value of the efforts of people who work in public service and of public service in general, not just because of my political beliefs or my constituents' testimonies, but from my own lived experience.

It is no secret—I have said this in the past—that I have relied heavily on public services, some more than others. If it had not been for the NHS and the social care system, my opportunity to live, study, work, achieve my aspirations and more would have been far out of reach. I am hugely privileged to have worked in one of our most cherished public services—the NHS.

It is because of that recognition of the value of public services that I and my party are passionate about building them, protecting them and—importantly—growing our economy and managing public money properly to fund them. Sadly, that is not an approach that other parties in the chamber share. We have heard much today from members on the Government benches about their support for public services, but let us take a look at their record.

Neil Gray: When it comes to Labour's plans for cuts, we do not need to read Anas Sarwar's lips. We just need to look at what the experts say. I will take one expert analysis in response to Labour's manifesto today. Gemma Tetlow, the chief economist at the Institute for Government, said:

"Like the Conservatives, Labour has done little to row back on the spending cuts already pencilled in for the next Parliament."

Why was she able to say that, having read the Labour manifesto?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: As I am going on to point out, the cuts that this Government has handed down to local government, education and the NHS—

Kevin Stewart: Answer the question.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I say to the member who is shouting from a sedentary position that I will come to that, but I will be taking zero lectures on cuts or public finances from this SNP Government. We have heard much from this Government about its support for public services, so let us look at its record on them.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can I get my time back if I take the intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, you can.

Kevin Stewart: Does Pam Duncan-Glancy agree with Wes Streeting that, when it comes to financing for the NHS and public services, all

roads lead to Westminster? What we are about to see from a Labour Government is exactly the same as what we are seeing from a Tory Government, which is public service cuts. That is not good enough. Perhaps Ms Duncan-Glancy can reply to that and say what change Labour really offers, because it is none.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that Ms Duncan-Glancy has got the gist.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the member for that intervention and for the invitation to say what change means. I will come to that later in my speech.

As my committee colleague Ross Greer has touched on, on this Government's watch, education is a huge issue. Teacher workloads are increasing, teaching has become a precarious career and, across the country, teacher posts are at risk, including 450 in Glasgow alone. The Government says that it has put £145 million into local authorities to protect teacher numbers, but that is against the savage cuts to local authority budgets of more than £6 billion since 2014. That money simply does not protect teacher jobs. It could be—and, in many cases, has been—spent several times over, plugging SNP gaps. That is not valuing our schools as public services.

Anyone who heard what I heard in the Education, Children and Young People Committee yesterday will know that the Government's record of supporting colleges as public services is no better either. Across Scotland, colleges face cut after cut, year after year, leaving them on what the Government's own skills adviser has called a "burning platform", with staff striking in nine of the past 10 years because Government cuts have undermined their pay and conditions, and fewer students able to go to college in the first place. I agree with Shona Struthers, who said to the committee that the inevitable cycle of less for less will impact the social and economic development of Scotland and that it beggars belief that the Government is allowing that to happen to colleges on its watch. That is not recognising the value of colleges as public services—that is decimating them.

On the public service of keeping a roof over our heads, the Government also fails. Housing remains grossly underfunded and unavailable. In the midst of a housing crisis, the Government's response has been to slash the affordable housing budget by nearly £200 million, and even the former First Minister Humza Yousaf's last attempts to save his job reinstated only a mere £80 million of that budget. It remains a devastating cut, especially for the 10,000 children living in temporary accommodation. That is not recognising the value of affordable housing as a public service.

Ben Macpherson: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Michelle Thomson: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will give way to Ben Macpherson, who I saw first.

Ben Macpherson: Pam Duncan-Glancy has articulated some of the problems that we collectively face as a society, but I just do not understand how the £18 billion-worth of public sector cuts that are being proposed by her party are going to help in any of those areas in any way.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I respect the member and his contributions, largely in the committee and on finances. I believe that the figure that he is quoting is from the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The clue is in the title. The Institute for Fiscal Studies looks at Government spending as it is today. We do not accept that version of Government spending. As Ben Macpherson will hear as I come on to it, we have plans to change the way in which public services are supported in Scotland and across the UK.

Despite the tireless efforts of our staff in the NHS, it, too, has been let down by this Government, as many colleagues, including Liz Smith, have pointed out. It has been plagued by record waiting times, with 800,000 people on waiting lists and millions of pounds spent on agency staff, while care staff are short-changed. Citizens are forced to spend thousands of pounds on private healthcare. [*Interruption.*] I know that members on the SNP benches do not like to hear that, but it is true. In addition, because of the Government's failure to deliver reform, £1.3 billion has been spent on delayed discharge since the Government committed to eradicate it.

Those are not the actions of a Government that values public service, but the good news is that change is coming. Despite what members on the Government benches claim, an incoming Labour Government will restore economic stability, grow the economy, unleash investment, boost wages, create jobs and protect public services in all of Scotland and across the UK. It will tackle tax dodging to usher in more money and more appointments in the NHS. It will tackle tax avoidance to tackle poverty. It will reform planning to unlock opportunities for house building.

Michelle Thomson: Will Pam Duncan-Glancy give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It will invest in state schools by making private schools pay their fair share. It will tax the eye-watering profits of oil and gas giants to bring down energy bills. That is the

change that Labour offers, and it is the change that the public know and want.

16:41

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Like other members, I start by thanking and paying tribute to those who work in our public services. As other members have said, they are the backbone of our society, and we should thank them for the work that they do. I never stop thanking them for the work that they did during the pandemic, which we should recognise every day in this Parliament.

During the SNP leadership election in 2023, the now Deputy First Minister famously—or, perhaps, for SNP members, infamously—said to the former First Minister:

“When you were transport minister, the trains were never on time; when you were justice minister, the police were strained to breaking point; and now as health minister, we’ve got record high waiting times.”

I have to say that I do not agree with the Deputy First Minister, because I do not think that she should have just blamed the former First Minister. This Government needs to take responsibility for that, which it has not, and today’s debate has demonstrated that, after 17 years, the Government finds it easy to get into the comfort zone of just blaming others.

The debate has probably not shone any light on where the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament genuinely could transform and reform our public services.

Neil Gray: Will Miles Briggs give way?

Miles Briggs: I will if there is time in hand.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a little bit of time.

Neil Gray: Of course, we take responsibility. Last week, I set out a debate on health service reform. As I pointed out to Miles Briggs’s colleague Brian Whittle, we have taken responsibility to raise revenue for our public services in Scotland. I understand that the Conservatives oppose that, but they need to be honest with the people of Scotland that that would mean a reduction in the amount of money that is available for our public services. When they come here complaining about the impact of austerity, they need to be plain and honest about the fact that they would see even further reductions in investment in our public services.

Miles Briggs: I will come on to that in my speech. I welcomed what the health secretary said last week. I have been calling for that during the whole time that I have been in this Parliament. We need to have a national conversation about where our health service is. The fact that, every single

week, as MSPs, we raise problems about our health service requires us to look in the mirror and consider why that is the case.

We should start by looking at Audit Scotland’s reports. It has highlighted workforce challenges, and has said:

“The Scottish Government needs to act quickly to deliver services differently.”

It has called on the Government to act on the workforce crises that our NHS has faced for too long.

Audit Scotland has said that the Scottish Government’s economic strategy “lacks ... political leadership”. There can be nothing more damning than Audit Scotland saying that politicians in the Government are not providing the leadership that we need to grow our economy and deliver our public services.

I want to touch on the recent declaration of a housing emergency by the Scottish Government. That is welcome. Each week, local authorities have declared housing emergencies—last week, it was Scottish Borders Council and, just this week, it was South Lanarkshire Council. However, we need a fundamental look at how we deliver housing in Scotland. I have consistently raised the issue of children living in temporary accommodation. The numbers on that are now through the roof, but ministers have not done things differently. They have put more and more pressure on local authorities at the same time as taking away funding from them. That has delivered the housing crisis, and ministers need to take responsibility for it.

The charitable sector has asked to be part of the solutions and has called on ministers to let it in, but we have not seen that happening, and we are now in a position in which we have another national emergency. We cannot simply allow every part of our public services to be given emergency status.

The cabinet secretary did not mention the need to reform our public services. Over the past 17 years, the SNP Government has neglected that opportunity, and the potential that exists for our public services to be improved has not been realised. Although the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has launched a national conversation, we do not know which direction of travel ministers want to take.

At general question time earlier today, I raised the issue of children being placed in adult services. Over the past 25 years, we have not reformed our mental health services to deliver the levels of provision that we need. We say that we want parity of esteem between physical health and

mental health, but we need to make sure that our mental health services are there to respond.

One area that is of interest, and which I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is looking at, is the reform work that is being done in London in relation to the Metropolitan Police. I know from my casework—I am sure that every member knows this—that, when someone is in a mental health crisis or in distress, we send out Police Scotland to deal with that, which is a completely inappropriate response. The police will then take that person to an accident and emergency department, where they will sit with the police for hours and not get an outcome. They will be taken home, and they might have their meds reviewed. We need to see something different happening.

It is important that we reform services in such a way that the third sector can be used to deliver a different outcome. That is why, as a country, we need to look at the right care, right person model that is being delivered by the Met Police. That model delivers a different response and a different outcome.

Kevin Stewart: I understand what Mr Briggs has said about the need for the right person to intervene at the right time. That is one of the reasons why we have the distress brief intervention projects going on in Scotland. The person who intervenes might be a police officer, or they might be a paramedic or social worker, but it will be someone who has been trained to deal with such situations. That is the right approach to take. In some regards, Mr Briggs and his colleagues need to look at what is already happening across the country with regard to how we treat folks who are in mental health distress.

Miles Briggs: The member will know of my interest in this area and of the work that I have done on it in my time in Parliament. In my region, the at-home nurse team in West Lothian, which provides intensive support to prevent children from being hospitalised, is a really important step forward.

I return to the subject of the different model that the Met has adopted. The Met commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, stated that the Met was failing Londoners

“first by sending police officers, not medical professionals, to those in mental health crisis, and expecting them to do their best in circumstances where they are not the right people to be dealing with a patient.”

In opening the debate for our party, my colleague and friend Liz Smith stated that the current failures in the Scottish economy were largely due to Scottish Government policy choices, from not passing on support to Scottish businesses, to its anti-growth agenda, which the

Greens brought forward when they were at the heart of Government. I agree with that, and I believe that it is time for Scottish Government ministers to dedicate themselves to growing our Scottish economy to deliver the funding that our public services need.

Another factor, which ministers have not yet acknowledged or addressed, is the fact that we are seeing a shift in population from west to east. That is not being reported on but, in years to come, it will present significant challenges for our country. Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland is the only part of our Scottish economy that is still growing and economically active. On top of that, 80 per cent of potential future growth in the Scottish population is predicted to be here in my region, in Edinburgh and the south-east.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I might be pushing it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should start to conclude.

Miles Briggs: That is why I have consistently championed investment in our public services here in Lothian, and it is why the Scottish Government needs to look at funding formulas in a way that it has not wanted to do. I have consistently raised that issue with both cabinet secretaries. The City of Edinburgh Council is the lowest-funded council and NHS Lothian is the lowest-funded health board, but we in Lothian are seeing all the pressures of growth. I know that some SNP colleagues would support me in what I am saying about that. Our public services need to be able to respond to that.

We all acknowledge that Scotland is facing many challenges in delivering sustainable public services. However, we need solutions from this Government, not simply a blame game. I will support the amendment in the name of my colleague Liz Smith.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Neil Gray, the cabinet secretary, to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Government. If you could take us up to decision time at 5 pm, that would be most helpful.

16:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): This debate has highlighted the dedication and commitment of this Government to invest in our public services to better the lives of people across Scotland. However, it has also reflected the challenging fiscal environment that we are currently in.

I will start by reflecting on the contribution that I just heard from Miles Briggs. I wish to engage with

him on the work that he is seeking to pursue around mental health. However, although he asked for additional investment in mental health, he concluded his remarks by saying that we needed to pursue business tax cuts instead of investing in our health service. He has also failed to answer the question where we would get the money from to see increased investment in our health service, if not from the more progressive taxation choices that we have made.

The work that we have been pursuing has not been helped by the cut to the Scottish block grant of just under half a billion pounds in real terms in 2024-25 compared with 2022-23, as was outlined by Karen Adam in her inspiring contribution on the pride of public services. As Karen Adam, Miles Briggs, Foysol Choudhury and Pam Duncan-Glancy did, I pay tribute to our incredible public sector workers, who do an outstanding job in the service of the people of Scotland.

In opening the debate, the cabinet secretary for finance made it clear that, regardless of the current limitations on us, we are using all the powers available to us in the current devolution agreement to focus on and prioritise maintaining and building sustainable and effective public services. Investing in our public services is one of this Government's key priorities; I only wish that it were a priority for other parties in the chamber.

Miles Briggs: We are marking 25 years of the Scottish Parliament being in existence. Over that time, collectively, with additional funding from the UK Government, we have doubled the amount of money that we have spent in our health service. I welcome that, and have always supported it. However, we have not doubled outcomes—in fact, in some cases, outcomes are going down. Has the cabinet secretary done any work to look at why we are not getting more out of our health services, even though we have put in more investment over decades?

Neil Gray: Of course, and that goes back to the points that I raised in the discussion on reform that I instituted last week, which is about the need to ensure that we invest in preventative measures. That work is not just starting; the work that we are doing on the vaccination programme and on minimum unit pricing is already preventing further ill health and ensuring that we are making progress with our health services. The investment that we are making to ensure that 100,000 children are kept out of poverty also has a direct consequence for the outcomes that we will see in our health services. I am more than happy to have that discussion and debate with Miles Briggs and others.

Shona Robison opened the debate by highlighting key areas of investment from the Scottish Government, and that was only some of

the investment that we have made in our public services. In addition to what we have heard so far, in relation to my portfolio of health and social care, the 2024-25 budget provides record funding of more than £19.5 billion for NHS recovery and health and social care, which is a real-terms uplift. We have invested more than £14.2 billion of that funding in our NHS boards, with additional investment of more than half a billion pounds, which is an almost 3 per cent real-terms increase.

Despite having one hand tied behind our back by Westminster austerity—as was so eloquently highlighted by Ben Macpherson—our investment in affordable housing in 2024-25 is nearly £600 million. Since 2007, we have delivered more than 40 per cent more affordable homes per head of population in Scotland than in England, and 70 per cent more than in Wales.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: Of course, but this will be for the last time for the moment.

Rhoda Grant: The cabinet secretary is boasting about housing investment, and yet he acknowledges that we are in the middle of a housing crisis. How did that happen?

Neil Gray: We have to reflect the financial reality that the Government is currently working with. We have seen a £1.3 billion cut to our capital budget and financial transactions reduced by 60 per cent. In spite of some of those cuts, we have still delivered a far higher per head of population level of house building under this Government than in England or, indeed, Wales. Of course, challenges persist, but we are making that investment.

In the education and skills sector—I declare an interest, as my wife is a teacher—Scotland has the highest level of spending per pupil in the United Kingdom, and the highest teacher pupil ratio. Last year, we invested £8,500 per school pupil, compared with £7,200 per pupil in England and Wales. Since the SNP abolished tuition fees, the number of new Scottish university students has grown by 31 per cent, and we have a record number of students from our most deprived communities.

On social security, the Government is spending record sums this year, with £6.3 billion for benefit expenditure. That is £1.1 billion more than the UK Government gives the Scottish Government for social security. That demonstrates our commitment to tackling poverty, supporting people and avoiding the need for people to rely on those public services. We are investing £614 million in new benefits and payments that are available only in Scotland, such as our landmark Scottish child payment.

I turn to some of the comments that have been made from the front benches. Liz Smith made a point about the block grant. In real terms, the block grant was lower in 2020-21 than it was in 2009-10. We have had 10 years of underinvestment and a decade of austerity. In recent years, there has been a 4 per cent real-terms decrease in total block grant expenditure between 2022 and 2024-25.

Liz Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: I will try to give way in a second.

I, too, wish Mark Griffin well in his recovery from Covid. However, I must challenge his assertion and that of Pam Duncan-Glancy on local government funding. Of course I recognise the challenges that exist across public services because of the decade and a half of austerity that we have faced, but the Accounts Commission has confirmed that, in the past year, this Government has passed on a real-terms increase to local government, in contrast with what has been done elsewhere in the UK.

Liz Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: I am very sorry, but I want to make progress. I will come back to Liz Smith if I can.

I highlight the very helpful contribution that Ross Greer made in saying that politics is about choices. Labour's choices will continue to ingrain poverty through continued austerity for public services and, as he said, the support for our poorest families.

I will now engage directly with the Tory and Labour amendments, which are false and hypocritical and do a grave injustice to those who are working hard in our public services to deliver for the people whom we serve.

First, I say to the Conservatives that Scotland is not the highest-taxed part of the UK. That is patent and demonstrable nonsense. The majority of people in Scotland pay less income tax than they would pay if they lived in the rest of the UK, and the average band D council tax bill in Scotland is £700 less than in England and £600 less than in Wales.

In Scotland, we have taken action to help to mitigate the UK cost of living crisis that has been presided over by the Conservatives, by freezing council tax for 2 million Scots this year. We have used the tax powers that are available to us to mitigate UK austerity by raising £1.5 billion more in revenue than we would have if we had done nothing. Without that, we would have seen cuts to our NHS, local government and other public services, which we have seen elsewhere in the UK. The Tories should at least be honest about that—which Brian Whittle, when I challenged him, squarely failed to do. However, I would expect that

action from this SNP Government to be opposed by the Tories, who pass on tax breaks for the wealthiest in society while cutting public services that we all rely on.

Shamefully, Labour also opposes us raising additional finance for public services. I also find it curious that Labour's amendment would delete the commitment to

"high-quality services",

the statement that we recognise

"the key role that the workforce plays in delivering"

those services, and the acknowledgement that

"public sector pay is higher in Scotland"

than in the rest of the UK.

It would also delete the criticism of spending cuts from the Tory spring statement. Why on earth would Labour do that? Why would it miss an opportunity to criticise the Tory UK Government and its austerity agenda, especially when Wes Streeting defended the challenges that are faced by the NHS in Wales by saying,

"all roads ... lead ... to Westminster"?

Perhaps that should not be curious at all, however, because Labour is laying the groundwork for the continued austerity that we have been promised from a Labour UK Government—£20 billion-worth of austerity, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies today.

On the one area of public service investment that we might see coming from Labour, which Pam Duncan-Glancy referred to—investment in the NHS—Labour has confirmed that that will be worth just £134 million for Scotland, which is barely enough to cover a 1 per cent pay rise for NHS staff and is less than most of the recent Tory consequential. That is not change; it is continued short change, and it is continued austerity. That is why Anas Sarwar's claim that there would be no more austerity rang so hollow the other night, when the First Minister exposed the austerity consensus in the Westminster establishment. Mr Sarwar's "Read my lips" line had about as much credibility as it did when George Bush used it.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): You must conclude, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: It took less than 24 hours for Keir Starmer to torpedo it. Last night, he shamefully admitted that there would be continued austerity for families in poverty under Labour, which would not scrap the two-child cap.

While we know who will be taking the decisions—and Labour has told us what it will do, as Michelle Thomson highlighted—the problem for Labour is that it can no longer pretend one thing in Scotland, do another at Westminster and hope

that the public will not notice. It will continue with austerity, hurting our communities and public services—

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: Labour will dance to the Farage tune on immigration, hurting our public services and our economy. Only the SNP will stand to break that austerity consensus, and only the SNP will deliver for public services in Scotland. While we continue to rely on decisions taken at Westminster, only independence will deliver the real change that the people of Scotland are looking for.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland's public services.

Decision Time

17:01

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-13602.1, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S6M-13602, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland's public services, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-13602.1, in the name of Liz Smith. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am afraid that I could not get connected. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hepburn. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)
 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)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (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)
 Dorman, 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)
 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)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 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)
 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)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 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)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 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)
 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 on amendment S6M-13602.1, in the name of Liz Smith, is: For 24, Against 81, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-13602.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, which seeks to amend motion S6M-13602, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland's public services, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)

Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (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)
 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)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 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)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (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)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-13602.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, is: For 45, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-13602, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland's public services, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the digital voting platform. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Haughey. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Gosal. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

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)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (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)
 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)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 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)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (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)
 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)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-13602, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scottish Government priorities—investing in Scotland’s public services, is: For 61, Against 46, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government’s continued investment in public services and shares its commitment to maintaining high-quality services that people in Scotland need; recognises the key role that the workforce plays in delivering public services and welcomes that public sector pay is higher in Scotland than other parts of the UK; acknowledges the importance of a socially just and progressive approach to public service design and delivery, underpinned by fair work and a progressive tax policy; agrees that the UK Spring Budget fell far short of what Scotland needs to deliver further investment in public services and infrastructure, and will result in a cut in the Scottish core block grant of around £0.4 billion in real terms in 2024-25 compared with 2022-23; is concerned that significant, real-terms spending cuts, assessed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies as being up to £20 billion by 2028 across the UK, will be needed as a result of the economic plans of either a Labour or Conservative UK administration; calls on the incoming UK administration to bring forward an emergency budget to restore the £1.3 billion cut in Scotland’s capital budget, and notes that, for as long as the Scottish Government remains on a fixed budget under the current devolution settlement, there are limits to what it can achieve in terms of investment in public services.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:10.

Correction

Jackson Carlaw MSP has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):

At col 51, paragraph 1—

Original text—

That was the reason why the corporate body came to the position that it did.

Corrected text—

That was the reason why the director of people, communications and inclusion took the decision they did.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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