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Thursday 20 June 2024

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 20 June 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. Our first item of business is general question time.

Childminders

1. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken to improve access to childminders. (S6O-03613)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don): Childminders are a hugely valued part of the early learning and childcare profession in Scotland, and we want more families to be able to access the unique benefits that they can offer.

We have been working hard with the Scottish Childminding Association on a new approach for the sector, and I am pleased to confirm that a three-year programme of childminder recruitment and retention was launched on 5 June. Backed by more than £1 million in Scottish Government funding, the programme for Scotland's childminding future will be available in at least 16 local authority areas during its first year.

The programme will involve the SCMA in scaling up its already successful pilots, which include a £750 start-up grant and tailored support for new childminders, as well as more practical assistance for the existing workforce.

Evelyn Tweed: Childminders provide a vital service but often work alone. How will the Government ensure that childminders are supported and that childminding can be a sustainable career?

Natalie Don: Evelyn Tweed is correct that, often, childminders run a business on their own, so it is important that they feel both supported and connected to others in the profession. The SCMA's new programme will implement a range of further measures to help childminders with their workload and professional development, building on the diverse range of support that the association already provides. That will include more practical assistance to existing childminders; the piloting of a new mentoring scheme, which aims to reduce workplace isolation and create networks of support; and a trial of funded time off the floor, which will test models of funded time for

childminders to undertake professional learning and networking activities.

From the feedback and engagement that I have had, I believe that those actions will help to ensure that childminding remains a valued, sustainable and fulfilling career choice.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A few weeks ago, the Scottish Government announced plans to increase Scotland's childminding workforce by 1,000. However, Scotland lost more than 2,500 childminders between 2012 and 2022. Does the minister accept that the plans do not really go far enough? How does the Government intend to replace 1,500 childminders as well as retain the current workforce, to fulfil the 1,140 hours of childcare flexibilities that were promised to Scottish parents?

Natalie Don: The pilot is a really positive start. However, we know that we have more to do. As I previously said, childminders are a hugely valued part of our childcare sector, so we want them to feel valued and safe in their roles. The pilot will have valuable learning; we will see how successful it is—I am very positive about that; then we will take further actions, based on that learning.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Childminders are hugely valuable in our child services. What figure does the minister hope to get to for the childminding community by 2026-27, given that it is currently at 3,225 and, as previously stated, it was at 6,200 back in December 2012? What is the minister's target?

Natalie Don: We aim to increase the sector by 1,000 childminders. In the first year of our programme, the SCMA aims to recruit 250 new childminders. As I have said, that is a really positive start, with big aims. Childminders are a hugely valued part of our sector and I am very positive about the campaign and the pilot, and what those will bring for the sector.

Antisocial Behaviour (Town Centres)

2. **Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its on-going work with local authorities, Police Scotland and other partners to tackle the reported increasing antisocial behaviour in town centres. (S6O-03614)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): We support Police Scotland and local authorities to continue to invest in prevention, early intervention and diversionary activities to reduce antisocial behaviour. They have a wide range of powers and are best placed to lead on addressing those issues.

In addition, an independent working group on antisocial behaviour is currently examining our

strategic approach to the issue and is undertaking widespread engagement in order to deliver its report later this year. We have also provided local authorities with more than £600 million of additional revenue funding, while Police Scotland has received an increase of £92.7 million, despite difficult financial circumstances that are due to United Kingdom Government austerity.

Paul O’Kane: The minister will be aware of the problems that antisocial behaviour causes across the country, but I want to mention specific incidents that have occurred in parts of Barrhead, which is in my region, and in particular around the Asda supermarket there. When we debated the issue last year, other members put to the minister the challenges that such behaviour presents across the country, and particularly around supermarkets. I have been engaging with the various stakeholders. I noticed that the minister mentioned that the independent working group on antisocial behaviour will report later this year. Will she agree to meet me to give me an update on that work? Can she be any more specific on the timescale for the publication of the working group’s report?

Siobhian Brown: I would be more than happy to meet Mr O’Kane. The timescale for publication of the work is the end of this year. We have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour in retail areas, and we are working on that. The member might also be interested to know that I have been visiting local authorities and seeing initiatives that operate around the whole of Scotland. I am looking to implement those and to provide good guidance to local authorities.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As the police are often the first line of response to incidents of antisocial behaviour, it is vital that policing continues to be a priority for the Scottish Government. With that in mind, will the minister provide further detail on the Scottish Government’s funding for policing to ensure that antisocial behaviour in communities continues to be fully addressed?

Siobhian Brown: Policing remains a Scottish Government priority. Despite the difficult financial circumstances that have been caused by the UK Government’s austerity policies, the Scottish budget for 2024-25 includes record total funding of £1.55 billion for the police, which, as I have just said, represents an increase of £92.7 million. That increase includes an additional £75.7 million in resource budget to protect and support front-line policing.

Decisions on the allocation of those resources, including those designed to tackle antisocial behaviour, are, quite properly, a matter for the chief constable, who is accountable to the Scottish Police Authority. When the 2024-25 budget was

announced in December last year, Ms Farrell made it clear to the Criminal Justice Committee that

“The allocation is an important recognition of Police Scotland’s value and the contribution that policing makes to Scotland being a safe place to live and work, with historically low levels of crime.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 20 December 2023; c 2.]

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Although I welcome the provision of free bus travel for under-22s, one unintended consequence is that a minority of young people have abused the scheme to commit antisocial behaviour outside their home towns. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has since told us that she has asked officials to consider whether temporary digital blocking measures could be used. Will the minister tell us what conversations she has had with the cabinet secretary? Will she also provide an update on whether such measures could be used to withdraw free travel from the minority of young people who commit antisocial behaviour across our towns?

Siobhian Brown: I have had several conversations with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport. We must remember that the vast majority of young people who travel by bus behave appropriately.

Although the Scottish Government can withdraw or suspend a travel card if a person

“knowingly allows”

it

“to be used by another person”,

the legislation that underpins the current scheme does not provide a clear mechanism for blocking of cards in response to allegations of antisocial behaviour. The Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 provides a wide range of measures for dealing with all antisocial behaviour, including dispersal orders, which can be considered by police, in consultation with the local authority, on an individual and temporary basis. Transport Scotland is also working closely with the bus industry to develop and implement any further measures that can be taken to deter antisocial behaviour.

Winchburgh (Railway Station)

3. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide further details of the progress that it has made regarding the delivery of a railway station in Winchburgh, including the date by which it anticipates the business case and cost will be finalised. (S6O-03615)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): As Sue Webber will be aware, the

proposal is included in the council's development plan. It was always a developer-led proposal, and it is one that I welcome, as I note the MSP for the constituency, Fiona Hyslop, does, too. There have been calls for the Government to get involved because of a lack of progress in taking the project forward for various reasons. I am happy to respond to those calls by bringing the parties together, which will allow progress to happen.

In April, I met Winchburgh Developments, West Lothian Council and Network Rail to discuss how they can support progress towards the delivery of a station in Winchburgh. All parties agreed to several actions, and Transport Scotland officials are investigating the development of the business case. I am aware that the council has now written to the city region deal project office to explore opportunities through the funding process.

The Scottish Government remains committed to progressing the proposal, and it is supporting and encouraging the council and the developer to continue engaging with the Government on the matter.

Sue Webber: I thank the minister for that response, and I remind him that no developer has ever led the delivery of a new station anywhere in Scotland.

The economic and environmental case for a train station at Winchburgh is undeniable. Passengers will save £2.4 million, and there will be £3.5 million of decongestion benefits. There will also be almost half a million fewer car journeys every year. The list goes on, as the minister acknowledged in his letter to Edward Mountain, the convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

There is keen interest in building a station at Winchburgh, and it remains of significant public interest. The next meeting is in five days. The people of Winchburgh deserve much more. Can we expect a positive announcement and significant progress to be made before we return to Parliament in September?

Jim Fairlie: To correct what the member has just said, East Renfrewshire Council is acting as the lead proposer for Balgray station. The council has obtained the required funding through the successful application to the city region deal and transport officials have provided East Renfrewshire Council with strategic support for the development of the outline business case and the final business case process. It is not correct to say that a council cannot lead on such a programme.

The Winchburgh proposal is a developer-led programme. The Government will support it in every way that we can, but the local authority and the developer have to get around the table so that we can make progress.

Schools (Rural Communities)

4. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support schools in rural communities. (S6O-03616)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Rural schools play an important role in our communities. In Scotland, there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. When local authorities plan to close a school, they are required to undertake a thorough and lengthy consultation process, including demonstrating the educational benefit of the closure, considering the impact of the school closure on local community and school travel arrangements, and consulting the community on alternatives to closure. That process ensures that the impact of any decision is properly considered and that options are explored. No school closure decision should ever be taken lightly.

Alexander Burnett: The cabinet secretary wrote to me on 3 June to confirm that the most recent list of rural schools in Scotland showed that there were 21 mothballed primary schools, with Aberdeenshire Council and Highland Council having the most, with four in each area. That list was from 2021, which is now three years ago. In Aberdeenshire alone, I believe that there are now 14 mothballed primary schools, and 16 more are at risk, including Tullynessle and Logie Coldstone primary schools in my constituency. That is a clear betrayal of our rural communities. Does the minister have any idea how many primary schools are currently mothballed across Scotland? What will he do about it?

Graeme Dey: We really need to admire the brass neck of the member in asking that question, given that Aberdeenshire Council is Tory controlled. Local authorities have responsibility for the school estate, and decisions on closures and mothballing of schools are for them to take. Ministers have the power to call in a local authority decision only when the closure of the school is permanent.

From the information about Tullynessle that we have been provided with thus far, that would not appear to constitute a permanent closure. However, my officials have written to the local authority to seek further information about its plans and to remind it of its responsibilities under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. I will write to the member about the numbers that he is seeking.

I go back to my earlier point about the absolute brass neck of Mr Burnett. If he is genuinely concerned and if he shares the concerns of local residents about the two school mothballings, as

they are referred to, he might want to have a chat with some of his councillor colleagues in Aberdeenshire.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am sure that the minister will welcome the progress on two new-build secondary schools in my constituency—Peebles high and Gala academy—which are due to be completed next year and are funded by the Scottish Government.

Does the minister agree that it is a massive burden on Scottish Borders Council's budget that Borders secondary schools were built under public-private partnerships and the private finance initiative in 2009 by the then Tory-Liberal Democrat administration at an initial cost of £72 million but, by the end of the contract in 2039, they will have cost £258 million, and that we should never forget the punishing continuing costs of projects funded by PPP/PFI, which, thankfully, the Scottish Government ditched?

Graeme Dey: The Scottish Government was pleased to announce in December 2020 that we would provide financial support to Scottish Borders Council for its priority projects—namely, Galashiels community campus and Peebles high school—through phase 2 of the joint £2 billion learning estate investment programme. As Christine Grahame rightly notes, that was not done through the discredited PFI scheme, which the public purse is still bearing the cost of and which limits the amount of money that we and, indeed, councils have to invest in front-line services. The toxic legacy of PFI is still being felt in Scotland, and Labour members should be ashamed of their party's record in government.

Developing the Young Workforce (Cowdenbeath)

5. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the developing the young workforce programme in the Cowdenbeath constituency. (S6O-03617)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The developing the young workforce programme plays a crucial role in the delivery of the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that school leavers are supported to achieve their potential. DYW school co-ordinators and regional groups, including the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland DYW regional group, which covers Fife, take the lead on planning and delivering tailored events to meet the needs of young people and employers, and they facilitate connections with a range of delivery partners.

The Scottish Government remains committed to the DYW programme, with £12.9 million being invested in 2024-25 to fund regional groups and school co-ordinators.

Annabelle Ewing: The minister will, of course, be aware that Fife has been a trailblazer in facilitating vocational training for young people, with Lochgelly high school, the Purvis Group and Babcock, among others, having played a pivotal role over the years. What can be done to embed the developing the young workforce programme throughout Scotland to ensure that all that can be done is being done to provide young people with a route into skilled and well-paid jobs?

Graeme Dey: I absolutely share Annabelle Ewing's high regard for the work of DYW, whether that be in her Cowdenbeath constituency, across Fife or elsewhere in Scotland. I also agree entirely that there is more to do to embed DYW into our offering for young people as they consider their future career paths.

The nature of DYW provision can vary from local authority area to local authority area. That is why my officials are working with DYW to see how we might enhance its standing.

I have been clear that I see DYW as an important pillar of the improved wider careers offering that we are developing as we seek to furnish our young people with the fullest possible understanding of the options that they have at their disposal.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Block Grant Changes

7. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicating that forecast United Kingdom Government tax and spending plans would be funded by reductions in public investment, what assessment it has made of the potential impact that any changes to Scotland's block grant resulting from this would have on Scotland's public finances. (S6O-03619)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted, whoever wins the election, unprotected budgets face cuts of up to £20 billion by 2028-29. We do not know what that means for our budget, as the IFS has pointed out that there is absolutely zero clarity from either the Conservatives or Labour about where those cuts might fall. However, decisions by the UK Government have already cost Scotland up to £1.6 billion in potential consequentials, and it is clear that any future UK Government will deliver more of the same for Scotland.

Elena Whitham: I am deeply concerned about the scale of the cuts that we face under the next UK Government. If a more realistic position is not taken by the leading Westminster parties, will the cabinet secretary call on her next UK counterpart to seriously consider the merits of Scotland's more progressive system of income tax, which could, if applied across the rest of the UK, provide more than £15 billion in additional tax take for vital public services?

Shona Robison: We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to use the powers at its disposal to provide the funding that is needed to invest in our vital public services. Our own decisions on income tax since devolution will result in an additional £1.5 billion being raised in 2024-25 compared with what would have been raised if we had matched current policy in the rest of the UK. Ultimately, our position is that far greater powers over taxation should be devolved so that we can design a tax system that works for Scotland and allows us to raise the revenue that is needed to invest in vital public services.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Could the cabinet secretary outline what the IFS says about the gap in the Scottish National Party's fiscal projections in its manifesto, which was launched yesterday, and how it intends to fill the £2 billion black hole in the Scottish Government's financial plans that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has outlined?

Shona Robison: Labour is on very dodgy ground indeed, given that it will not clarify whether it will continue with an austerity budget if it wins the election, which will mean that cuts of up to £20 billion will ensue by 2028-29. On top of that, the leader of the Scottish Labour Party has said that Labour will reverse the decisions that we have taken using our tax-raising powers in Scotland, which have raised £1.5 billion. If that reversal happens, we will have not only austerity cuts from Westminster but a double whammy of £1.5 billion less funding for vital public services. The public need to know about those Labour plans.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Rosebank Oil and Gas Field

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The oil and gas sector is vital for the north-east and for the whole of Scotland. The Rosebank energy development will create 1,600 jobs and will bring £6 billion of investment to the country. Why does John Swinney oppose that? (S6F-03240)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues in connection with the Rosebank oilfield have been the subject of a very active case, which is influenced by a decision in the Supreme Court today, so I will need to be careful about what I say in relation to the Rosebank development.

As Mr Ross will acknowledge, the Scottish Government believes that any new application for oil and gas developments has to have associated with it a very detailed and specific climate compatibility assessment, which should be undertaken to determine whether any such development can proceed in a fashion that is compatible with our journey to net zero. That is the approach that the Government believes should be taken.

Douglas Ross: We are talking about 1,600 jobs, £6 billion of investment and a Scottish National Party First Minister who cannot welcome that and cannot support it, because the SNP opposes every single new oil and gas development in the North Sea.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): No.

Douglas Ross: Oh! We are hearing "No" from Kevin Stewart. I wonder whether John Swinney will be able to tell us which developments the Scottish Government supports.

Here is what some of John Swinney's predecessors have said. Nicola Sturgeon, who John Swinney stood side by side with for decades, said that Rosebank was the

"greatest act of environmental vandalism"

in her lifetime. When the development was given the green light, Humza Yousaf said that it was "the wrong decision". Just last week, John Swinney, speaking about new oil and gas licences, said that the granting of them was "utterly irresponsible".

Why has SNP leader after SNP leader been against granting new oil and gas licences for the North Sea?

The First Minister: I think that one of the reasons why Douglas Ross is leaving the leadership of the Conservative Party—

Douglas Ross: You don't answer the questions—that's why.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Ross!

The First Minister: Oh, so Mr Ross—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister!

Mr Ross, we will not continue in such a manner. We must conduct our business in a courteous and respectful manner.

The First Minister: I suspect that one of the reasons why Douglas Ross is leaving the leadership of the Conservative Party is that he is not presenting an accurate picture of the remarks that I have made. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The specific remark that I made was that a commitment by the Prime Minister to undertake 100 new oil and gas licences without any scrutiny was climate change denial of the first order, and utterly and totally reckless. Those were my words, and I will not have them misrepresented by Douglas Ross.

We have a rational and considered process, which we have argued for, which is that every individual application should be subject to a climate compatibility assessment, because there is a journey that we as a country have to make to reach net zero. That is inescapable.

What is clear from the position that has been taken by the Prime Minister, which has been supported by Douglas Ross and the Conservatives, is that they do not care about the journey on climate; they are not interested in the crisis that we face with the climate emergency. The Scottish Government will take the responsible approach to managing the transition and the challenges of the climate emergency.

Douglas Ross: What we have just heard from John Swinney—and his MSPs are applauding—is that he and the SNP do not care about tens of thousands of jobs in the north-east of Scotland. They do not care about the oil and gas sector, which is needed for our energy security now and going forward. When Rosebank and Cambo were approved—just as when any new development is approved—the SNP opposed it. The SNP opposes new oil and gas developments.

John Swinney did not seem to want to hear what the previous First Minister said, nor did he want to hear his own comments that new licences were “utterly irresponsible”. Let us hear from some of his current cabinet ministers. Màiri McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy, said:

“we do not agree with the UK Government issuing new oil and gas licences.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2022; c 12.]

That is from the SNP Government's energy secretary.

I have with me a letter that her predecessor, Neil Gray, the former energy secretary, wrote to climate activists. He said:

“We have long expressed our concern about Rosebank being given the go-ahead.”

Before that, Michael Matheson lodged a consultation on a presumption against new oil and gas licences. Why does SNP energy secretary after SNP energy secretary oppose new oil and gas licences, which are crucial to the Scottish energy sector?

The First Minister: I think that if Mr Ross were to look at the material that the Government has published and the process that we believe should be taken forward in a rational and considered way, he would find that the Government's position is anchored around a number of principles. First, we have to assess the compatibility of any oil and gas licence application with the journey towards net zero, and a rigorous and thorough process must be undertaken around that. Secondly, in coming to that assessment, we must consider issues in relation to our energy security. Thirdly, we must take a responsible approach to managing the transition to net zero.

I am not going to stand here and be lectured by a leader of the Conservatives, whose party presided over the industrial devastation of central Scotland, the consequences of which we as a Government are still having to address. The Government will take a responsible approach to the management of the oil and gas sector and its transition to net zero, and we will take absolutely no lessons from the Conservatives.

Douglas Ross: I say to John Swinney that there is nothing rational or considered about turning your back on the Scottish oil and gas sector by claiming that you are against every oil and gas licence but being unable to say so, being unable to be truthful with the people of Scotland. The First Minister should just be honest: the SNP opposes every single new oil and gas licence being issued by the United Kingdom Government—that is the case. Whenever a new development is proposed in the North Sea, the SNP opposes it. It opposes every round of new licences that are granted for the oil and gas sector. In recent years, it has not supported any new fields—not one.

Whatever John Swinney is claiming today is only a temporary position for the SNP. Its position is very clear: it does not, and will not, stand up for Scotland's oil and gas industry. It is willing to put

tens of thousands of jobs and the north-east's economy at risk. The Scottish Conservatives support Scotland's oil and gas industry. Why does the SNP oppose it?

The First Minister: I am not sure that Douglas Ross is on his strongest ground—

Douglas Ross: About oil and gas?

The First Minister: —in taking me to task about honesty.

Douglas Ross: Here is Honest John.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I ask you to apologise for that comment.

Douglas Ross: I apologise for calling the First Minister Honest John.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, we are not going to continue like this. I ask you to reflect on your conduct.

The First Minister: I do not think that Douglas Ross is in a particularly strong position today to raise issues of honesty with me, when the Gambling Commission is investigating the alleged conduct of senior figures in the Conservative and Unionist Party. I think that Douglas Ross is on thin ground.

I also do not think that—

The Presiding Officer: Sorry, First Minister.

Mr Ross, this is actually First Minister's question time, when many members across the chamber wish to have an opportunity to put a question to the First Minister. I would like to make sure that that is possible for as many members as possible. In order to do that, we must conduct ourselves in a courteous and respectful manner.

The First Minister: I also do not think that Douglas Ross is on strong ground in attacking me about the rational and considered position that the Scottish Government is taking, when the Prime Minister is ignoring the climate emergency by sanctioning 100 oil and gas licences without any questions being asked. That is irresponsible. That is action that will accelerate the climate emergency.

This Government will take a rational and considered approach to oil and gas developments. We will also support the oil and gas sector to transition to the essential work that we need to undertake on renewables, because Scotland's future lies as a green energy renewables powerhouse, and the Scottish Government is putting in place the measures to make that happen.

National Health Service Treatment

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Our national health service faces a national crisis in what is known as corridor care, where patients are treated on trolleys in corridors because there are simply not enough beds in wards for them. This week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine published a new analysis that found that, on average, 45 per cent of patients who were treated in our emergency departments did not have access to a private cubicle. In the RCEM's words,

"when no cubicle is available, patients are treated in other areas: trolleys in corridors, cars, the waiting room, relative rooms, plaster rooms."

I ask members to imagine themselves, or one of their loved ones, lying on a trolley for hours with no privacy and no dignity, just pain and distress. After 17 years of this Scottish National Party Government, why has corridor care become such a commonplace?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Sarwar will know, the issues and challenges in the national health service today are driven by a number of factors. One of them is the increase in demand in the aftermath of Covid, which the national health service is doing its level best to try to address.

We are wrestling also with the challenges of our hospitals being significantly congested because of the challenges around delayed discharge. Those challenges come largely from the fact that we do not have enough social care packages available in the community, because we do not have enough people in the workforce to deliver the volume of social care that is required. That is a consequence of the loss of population because of the loss of free movement under Brexit. The issues that we are wrestling with are significant and acute, and the Government and our health boards are focused on addressing that.

Finally, I say to Mr Sarwar that, if anybody is treated in the fashion that he has recounted and if anybody has that experience—I have seen media reports this morning of a particular case at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital—I apologise unreservedly to them, and I assure members of the public and their families that the Government is doing all that it can to address that circumstance.

Anas Sarwar: I have been coming to the chamber week after week for the past three years, and week after week we have been hearing apologies from SNP First Ministers. We then get apologies the week after and the week after that, and nothing changes in people's lived experience.

Let us be clear: long waits cost lives. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has warned that, for every 72 patients who wait over eight hours in

accident and emergency departments, there will be one excess death. That is a death that could have been avoided if the patient had been treated on time. That means that, so far this year, more than 1,000 Scots have died who could have been saved had they been treated on time. That is 1,000 avoidable deaths of people so far this year alone, and it is only June. Those are fathers and mothers, and sons and daughters, who died because they could not get their care on time. Why have those families been so badly let down by the SNP Government?

The First Minister: In my earlier answer, I set out some of the issues that are driving that particular situation and I will repeat them: the increase in demand after Covid; the congestion in our hospitals, which now have in excess of 95 per cent occupancy, which is far too high and should be about 10 per cent lower for ordinary activity; and the absence of adequate social care capacity in the community, because we do not have enough social care workers to deliver social care packages. That is the explanation of the problem.

Mr Sarwar says that he comes here week after week to raise these issues. I know that he does, and he gets these answers, but what is required is that we take action. This Government has taken the action of increasing tax on higher earners in order to boost investment in the national health service. The national health service would have had less money available to it if this Government had not taken the hard decisions on tax.

The general election gives us an opportunity to do something about this. We could encourage more people into the labour force, which would require us to reintroduce freedom of movement, so that people can come to work in this country, or encourage more investment and take more investment decisions, such as ending austerity. However, Mr Sarwar's party is proposing no answer to these issues. In fact, it is proposing the reverse by saying that it will maintain Brexit and austerity. That is not good enough—it is time for the Labour Party to act.

Anas Sarwar: If that is the best answer that a politician who has been in power for 17 years can give, he has to take a serious look in the mirror. In fact, it was John Swinney, as finance secretary, who cut local government and social care budgets across the country, so perhaps he should reflect on his own record, because the reality is that patients and staff have been failed and let down by this SNP Government.

A few weeks ago, the Royal College of Nursing reported on this issue, and it quoted a Scottish nurse, who said:

"We don't complain for ourselves but for the patient. There are no screens to go round the patient. So, if they are being bed bathed or need a bed pan, you have to take

a patient out of their bed space and move them into a corridor, then move the extra patient into the bed space to use the bed pan. It's time consuming, there is not enough space in the rooms. It's undignified for the patient."

That unbearable situation is unfair to patients and staff.

First Minister, can you explain directly to that heartbroken nurse why you and your Government continue to let them down so badly?

The Presiding Officer: Members should always speak through the chair.

The First Minister: I have explained the challenge and the difficulty. The Government has taken the action of increasing taxation for higher earners in order to invest more in the national health service than would have been the case had we just passed on the consequential from United Kingdom funding. We have taken the hard decisions, and there was, of course, a time when Mr Sarwar would have supported us, but he has now U-turned on that position. As a consequence of what he said on Tuesday, he wants to cut the money that is available to the public finances.

Mr Sarwar is shaking his head at me. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: Mr Sarwar obviously does not understand what he was saying at his press conference on Tuesday. The consequences of his stance will be to reduce public expenditure in Scotland. It is, quite simply, beyond credibility to come here and ask me to invest more money in the national health service, in order to tackle the issues that Mr Sarwar is concerned about, when he wants to cut public expenditure and any prospective incoming United Kingdom Government will also cut public expenditure.

Anas Sarwar: What about the nurse?

The First Minister: My answer to that nurse is that we must have an end to austerity, and she will not get that from the Labour Government.

Tax

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** In precisely that vein, the First Minister tried this week to present the Scottish National Party as the only party that is committed to ending the cuts and reversing austerity. Apart from changes to income tax, which have already been done in Scotland, thanks to pressure from the Greens, the only actual change that he proposed was to devolve taxes and not increase them. Scotland should have control over oil and gas windfall taxes, other corporate taxes, national insurance, fuel duty and VAT, but only if we use those powers to raise revenue. The only change that the First Minister proposed was a VAT cut. Does he agree with the

Greens that reversing the cuts and providing the investment that the country so clearly needs can be done only by raising significant revenue from the super-rich, who are hoarding the country's wealth?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are two aspects to answering that question. The first is the actions of the Scottish Government, and Mr Harvie will be familiar with these points. We have taken a range of decisions to vary the tax position in Scotland and, in some circumstances, to ask higher earners to pay more in taxation where that is appropriate. The Government has set out its position and its fiscal approach to enable that to be the case.

There is then the debate about the forthcoming United Kingdom election. I set out my party's position yesterday, and if the Presiding Officer will forgive me, I refer Mr Harvie to the contents of our manifesto, which sets out a number of tax and spending changes that we would make to enable the priorities that we set out to be afforded within the financial envelope that is available to us.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call Mr Harvie, I remind members that the chamber is not the place to campaign for a UK general election.

Patrick Harvie: Indeed, Presiding Officer.

The First Minister is right about the additional revenue from income tax as a result of the work that the Greens did to show how that could be done, but he presented no plans at all for a wealth tax. As I said, the Greens worked out the detail on progressive income tax for Scotland, so maybe the First Minister is relying on us once again to do the work for him. He supports our proposals for a wealth tax on the richest 1 per cent, which would raise at least £70 billion. The real problem for the First Minister is that, whichever party forms the next UK Government, it will still be committed to Tory fiscal rules and will still refuse to rejoin the European Union, which will cut off both sources of extra revenue that the First Minister is relying on.

When a new Labour chancellor inevitably imposes more austerity to keep Labour's new billionaire backers happy, what will the First Minister do with the taxes that he does control? Will he go further to raise the funds that we need to stop more cuts in Scotland, and will he finally scrap the broken council tax system to let our councils raise the revenue that they need to protect their services?

The First Minister: There are obviously a lot of fiscal choices involved in Mr Harvie's question. He knows me well enough to know that the budget does not get written from here randomly during question time on a Thursday afternoon. There will be a process of engagement across the

parliamentary spectrum to enable that to be undertaken.

However, I agree with Mr Harvie that the conspiracy of silence that exists between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party to hide the £18 billion of cuts from the public is reprehensible. The one thing that must happen after the election that we face is an end to austerity. Our public services cannot cope with any more austerity and, unfortunately, the outcome of the United Kingdom general election—the election of either a Conservative or a Labour Government—will deliver more austerity. We need to use our votes effectively in the election to prevent that from happening.

Remote Visa

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the call from the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland for the next United Kingdom Administration to pilot a remote visa to benefit remote areas such as the Highlands, in line with the Migration Advisory Committee recommendation, and any implications that this could have for Scotland's economy. (S6F-03255)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The UK Government's own Migration Advisory Committee described our rural visa pilot proposal as

"sensible and clear in both scale and deliverability",

and it highlighted that it is in the UK Government's interest to trial it. Despite that, and despite the harm that has been caused to our rural and island communities by a hard Brexit, the current United Kingdom Government refused to engage.

The business sector recognises those harms. It is therefore welcome that FSB Scotland is calling for a rural visa pilot, which recognises that businesses need to attract people to Scotland to contribute to our economy and communities. Our offer to the next United Kingdom Government is simple—work with us and with stakeholders across Scotland, which are calling in the strongest terms possible for that pilot to be delivered.

Clare Adamson: Scotland's rural communities often face economic challenges for a range of reasons, and that has been exacerbated by a hard Tory Brexit. What is the First Minister's latest assessment of the impact of Brexit on the population of rural Scotland and on the ability of businesses across Scotland that face acute workforce shortages to attract new employees? What is his response to the rejection of the European Commission's offer of youth mobility for under-30s?

The First Minister: The issues that Clare Adamson puts to me are very real. Over the weekend and at the start of this week, I spent several days in the north-east, the Highlands, the north-west and our islands on the west coast. Everywhere that I went, I heard about the challenges of availability of population, which is at the heart of Clare Adamson's questions.

The initiative that the European Commission took in proposing a youth mobility scheme is welcome. Such a scheme would be compatible with the Scottish Government's openness to freedom of movement for individuals. It is a matter of record that the current United Kingdom Government has resisted addressing those issues. I hope that, after the election, there will be some opportunity to advance those issues, and I will constructively take them forward with an incoming United Kingdom Government. I intend to engage constructively on those questions so that we can find practical solutions to the issues that have been put to me by businesses.

In reference to the point that Mr Sarwar raised about the health service, one of the areas that face the greatest challenge in relation to delayed discharge is the Highlands. That challenge is about the availability of population in communities to deliver social care.

The issues that Clare Adamson puts to me are very important, and the Government will engage constructively to try to resolve them with an incoming United Kingdom Government.

Nuclear Power

5. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what his response is to the reported comment from the Nuclear Industry Association that his stance on nuclear power is "hopelessly ideological and anti-science". (S6F-03246)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government does not support the building of new nuclear power stations in Scotland. We have abundant natural resources and a highly skilled workforce that enables us to take advantage of the many renewable energy opportunities.

Evidence shows that new nuclear is more expensive than renewable alternatives. Nuclear energy also creates radioactive waste, which must be safely managed over many decades to protect the environment, and that requires complex and expensive handling. The Scottish Government is supporting continued growth in renewables, storage, hydrogen and carbon capture technologies to drive economic growth, support green jobs and provide secure, affordable and clean energy for Scotland.

Graham Simpson: So it is "hopelessly ideological and anti-science".

Wind energy is available only 45 per cent of the time and it requires back-up from gas. In comparison, nuclear is available 90 per cent of the time and is therefore far more reliable. The First Minister's anti-nuclear energy stance has seen gas consumption double since 2015, so we have to assume that he wants to follow the example of Germany, Austria and Belgium, whose carbon emissions have risen after the decommissioning of nuclear plants.

Last week, the GMB congress called for the Scottish Government to lift the ban. It has now invited Kate Forbes to meet nuclear workers at Hunterston. Will she go?

The First Minister: I gave Graham Simpson a considered answer. I do not think that it could in any way be described as ideological, because I made the point that evidence shows that new nuclear is more expensive than renewable alternatives. We are facing a cost of living and public finance crisis, so any responsible First Minister will look to make sure that we take the most fiscally efficient approach to energy generation.

This Government, as a result of its clear policy leadership, has successfully decarbonised electricity generation in Scotland. We have developed renewable energy with policy certainty. I want to give the same policy certainty to storage, to hydrogen and to carbon capture technologies, in order to drive economic growth and support green jobs.

What troubles me is that we have fabulous projects in Scotland—in, for example, carbon capture and technology, such as the Acorn project—and we have been led up the garden path by the Treasury and by United Kingdom ministers. I have lost count of the number of times, when I was a senior minister, that UK ministers promised me, face to face, an acceleration of the Acorn project. It has not happened.

I am afraid to say that Graham Simpson does not have a leg to stand on with that question. We have a clear strategy on renewables, and we will pursue it sustainably to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I fully support the First Minister's stance regarding nuclear power. Has any MSP ever written to the Scottish Government to propose or support the building of nuclear power stations in their communities in areas that they represent?

The First Minister: I am not personally aware of any such correspondence. However, it is important that we have a very clear strategy for

the generation of electricity in our country. The Government is giving that policy certainty and I want to ensure that it is widely understood in Scotland.

Sponsorship of Cultural Events

6. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what assurances the Scottish Government can provide to the arts and culture sector to ensure confidence, in light of the reported issues with the sponsorship of cultural events. (S6F-03260)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government recognises the valuable role that corporate and philanthropic giving plays in supporting the culture sector, and we are committed to working with all interested parties to help to restore the confidence that has been damaged in light of recent events. The Scottish Government has publicly called for dialogue and, crucially, has highlighted the damage that disinvestment campaigns are doing, which fundamentally undermines the sector and our world-class festivals, a number of which continue to receive significant amounts of public funding. Indeed, Scottish Government funding to the culture sector is increasing by £15.8 million in this financial year to £196.6 million, and we have also recently reaffirmed our commitment to investing at least £100 million more, annually, in culture and arts by the financial year 2028-29.

Neil Bibby: Many figures in Scotland's culture sector are warning that the scale of their funding crisis cannot be overstated. There is a real need to shore up confidence in supporting cultural organisations so that they are targets for investment, not disinvestment. I backed calls from the sector for the Government to hold a festivals funding summit back in April, but the Government rejected that proposal. That position is surely now unsustainable. Will the First Minister convene an urgent meeting of private and philanthropic supporters to ensure on-going sponsorship of the arts and culture sector?

The First Minister: I am very happy to engage on the point that Mr Bibby has raised. I welcome his question, because it provides me with the opportunity to say a bit more about the issue. I have been deeply concerned by the events that have taken place. I have spoken with the leadership of Baillie Gifford; I am concerned about the targeting of that company, because I welcome the philanthropic support that it provides to many organisations. I have reassured the company of the importance that I attach to its contribution to the economy. The disinvestment campaigns are misplaced; I do not think that they achieve their objectives; and they are now jeopardising really

important cultural festivals that I know Mr Bibby and I value equally.

I will take away Mr Bibby's proposal. I said in my original answer that the Government has publicly called for dialogue. Angus Robertson, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, has been engaging heavily on the question with a number of interested parties. However, if a further, more formal dialogue is required, I will consider that proposal and reply to Mr Bibby.

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

GP Practices (Penicuik)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is aware of the concerns about cuts to the services of general practitioner practices in Penicuik, which the practices state are due in part to NHS Lothian's increasing rental costs. As the First Minister will imagine, I have had many emails on the matter from concerned constituents. Has NHS Lothian taken into account the substantial increase in house building, and therefore in population, in Penicuik and the surrounding area?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will have to explore that particular point to determine whether that analysis has been undertaken. I understand the challenge that Christine Grahame has raised about the sharp rise in population in the Penicuik area, which is part of the particularly acute rise in population in general in the south-east of Scotland—particularly in West Lothian, Midlothian, East Lothian and the city of Edinburgh. That rise will place a strain on public infrastructure such as GP surgeries.

The issues relating to charges for premises and utilisation costs are a matter for negotiation between GP practices and health boards, but I will take away the specific point that Christine Grahame put to me in order to determine what analysis has been put in place to address the issue.

River Garden Auchincruive

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party awarded funding to River Garden, a rehabilitation centre in Auchincruive, to help 56 people recover from drug addiction, but that funding has been paused. Those financial constraints mean that the centre can currently accommodate only six people and that the future of the facility is now at risk, with fears that it may close within weeks.

Scotland has the worst rate of drug deaths in Europe, but beds are lying empty because funding

has been frozen. Will the First Minister look at that immediately and sort it out?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is a very specific issue, so I cannot give Sharon Dowey a direct response today, but I will take that away and explore it.

My answer to a question from Mr Greene a few weeks ago indicated that we are on target to increase the number of beds available for rehabilitation services, according to the expectations of the national mission on drug deaths, so I am surprised to hear the information that Sharon Dowey has put to Parliament today, given that it is my expectation that we will achieve our published targets.

I will take that particular question away and explore the issue of River Garden.

Social Services (Cuts)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Across Scotland, national health service and social care partnerships are facing a combined budget gap of almost £1.4 billion, which means that there will be severe cuts to social care services. In Glasgow, that will lead to cuts to community health services, cuts to the discharge and resettlement teams, cuts to care home nursing teams and the loss of 72 staff, including health visitors, nurses, allied health professionals and complex needs workers. Will the First Minister tell me why, if we all agree that we must increase support for primary care, his Government is doing the exact opposite in Glasgow and is cutting social services and staff?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is courageous questioning from Jackie Baillie. For some considerable time, I have been trying to set out to Parliament the enormous pressure on public finances. *[Interruption.]* If Jackie Baillie would stop interrupting me, we might make a little more progress.

Scotland faces a public spending crisis, but the Labour Party is proposing to continue that austerity. That is what is being proposed. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: This Government has taken hard decisions to increase the resources that are available for investment in public services. We have asked people with higher earnings to contribute more in taxation to enable us to invest more in the health service and in social care. That is what we have done. Jackie Baillie opposed that—she opposed every single bit of it.

There is now an opportunity, on 4 July, to elect a Government that could end austerity, but the Labour Party is not seizing the opportunity to end austerity—the Labour Party is going to prolong

austerity. I gently suggest to Jackie Baillie that it would help the situation if the Labour Party committed itself to ending austerity and supported this Government's agenda so that we could address the issues that she raises with me.

National Health Service (Spending)

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Analysis by the Nuffield Trust has indicated that both Labour's and the Tories' plans for the national health service would leave the health service with lower spending increases than those during the years of Tory austerity. *[Interruption.]* Does the First Minister agree that we should be prioritising additional investment in our NHS, not cutting it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): While Evelyn Tweed was asking her question, the source of her information—the Nuffield Trust—was being criticised by members in this Parliament. It is important that we all recognise that the Nuffield Trust, which is the source of the information that Evelyn Tweed put on the record, is a much-respected health commentary organisation. The trust has indicated that the proposals in the Labour and Conservative manifestos would result in lower increases in health spending than those during the worst years of Conservative austerity.

That means that there has been a missed opportunity to address the very issues that Jackie Baillie and Anas Sarwar have put to me today. We have to ensure that we have a realistic debate about investment in the health service. This Government has taken the hard decisions to increase tax on higher earners so that we can invest more in the national health service. I wish that other people would follow the example that we have shown about investment in the health service.

Parole System

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Last week, *The Courier* reported:

"A new parole hearing date has been confirmed for Angus killer Tasmin Glass as she seeks release from prison after serving only half her ten-year sentence ... Her case will now be considered by the Parole Board ... for a third time on July 26 ... the day before a memorial motorbike ride in honour of her victim Steven Donaldson ... A family spokesperson said: 'The Parole Board ... has kept us waiting since February ... It has been a long and difficult wait for us ... with the Scottish parole board deferring the decision twice already ... The timing of the parole hearing is difficult for us.'"

The Courier's voice for victims campaign considers that the parole system retraumatizes victims and needs greater transparency and communication between those who are involved. Does the First Minister agree? If so, what will he do about it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express my sympathy to the family that is involved in this case—the Donaldson family. I am familiar with the case, given my representation of areas adjacent to those affected.

As Mr Kerr will know, the decisions that are taken by the Parole Board for Scotland are for the Parole Board and are independent of Government. He would not expect me to comment on the substance of them.

I accept Mr Kerr's point that all aspects of our justice system must be trauma informed. Before my election as First Minister, I sat with colleagues on the Criminal Justice Committee hearing evidence about the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which legislates in favour of trauma-informed practice in the justice system. I am very sympathetic to the importance of that point in every respect, and all aspects of the justice system must be trauma informed.

A range of measures are in place already. The bill prompts us to reconsider and review whether they are sufficient to address these challenges and questions. I give Mr Kerr the commitment that the Government will do that as we explore the bill's provisions during its passage and determine whether any additional provisions are required to address the legitimate point that he puts to me.

Prostate Cancer (Diagnostic Hubs)

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): A constituent in Lothian has been diagnosed with prostate cancer and has been told that his tumour is growing. He is on an eight-month waiting list for surgery and has no idea when treatment will start. Public Health Scotland found that only 36.4 per cent of patients with prostate cancer received treatment within the Government's target of 62 days, which is the lowest percentage for any major cancer type. Will the First Minister advise members what the Scottish Government is doing to bring down those unacceptable waiting times?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I am sorry that Mr Choudhury's constituent is facing the anxiety that they are facing. If he wishes to share details of that particular case with me, I will have it examined to see whether there is anything that can be done to address it.

The Government has invested £70 million in the endoscopy and urology diagnostic plan, which includes a commitment to develop urology diagnostic hubs that are designed to speed up the treatment of cases of the type that Mr Choudhury puts to me. They will enable us to detect cancer earlier and faster and intervene at the earliest possible stage, which is crucial in cancer care.

I assure Mr Choudhury of the importance that the Government attaches to this important area of

health service policy. If he cares to advise me about the individual case, I will see what can be done to address the issues that he puts to me.

Economic Growth

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The latest purchasing managers index report from the Royal Bank of Scotland has shown that Scotland was a stand-out performer among the United Kingdom nations and regions last month, with private sector economic growth accelerating to the fastest pace in two years. What assessment has the First Minister and the Scottish Government made of the findings, and what steps is the Scottish Government taking to continue to help our economy to thrive?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much welcome the findings from the report, which signals a strengthening of private sector activity in Scotland. It confirms that that activity has expanded for the fifth month running and at the strongest pace in two years.

As Parliament will know, one of the four priorities of the Government is to strengthen the economy, and the Deputy First Minister is leading work, with my support, to advance that within Government. We are taking measures to build on the good work that has been done to encourage the start-up community and further investment is being provided in the scale-up community. We are seeing some of the fruits of that in the success of business, which underpins the very positive information in the purchasing managers index report.

I assure Mr MacDonald of the Government's continued focus on ensuring that we strengthen economic growth and economic activity, because that is the foundation of good and strong public services in our country.

MCR Pathways (Funding)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister has said that his biggest priority in government is to eradicate child poverty, yet, this morning, Scottish National Party and Green councillors in Glasgow voted to cut the celebrated MCR Pathways scheme by 50 per cent. Celebrated High Court judge Rita Rae has said that that will be a disaster and that it will bring people into the criminal justice system, while former director of education in Glasgow Maureen McKenna has said that it is inexplicable.

Members of my family take part in the MCR Pathways scheme. It is genuinely one of the best measures that we have ever developed to improve the lives of young people, get them out of harm's way and give them life-changing opportunities. Surely the First Minister agrees that the proposed

cut is a regressive, retrograde step. Will he do something to ensure that the MCR Pathways scheme is not cut but expanded, given that it is one of the most successful public policies that we have?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the work of MCR Pathways. I supported its introduction into public policy when I was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and I recognise the transformative effect that it can have on young people.

Decisions about the allocation of funding are matters for individual local authorities. The Government has given local government a record funding settlement of more than £14 billion for this financial year, which will have been allocated proportionately to Glasgow City Council.

I encourage members to look carefully and seriously at the work of MCR Pathways, recognising the benefits that it can deliver for young people around the country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Jamie Greene. There will be a short suspension to allow people who wish to leave the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

West Coast Ferry Services

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage those who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13505, in the name of Jamie Greene, on west coast ferry disruption and replacement. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern reports of a number of ongoing issues affecting CalMac ferry services on the west coast of Scotland ahead of the busy summer tourist season; further notes, in particular, reportedly ongoing problems with the MV Caledonian Isles, which were identified during its annual overhaul; understands that, as a result of the loss of the MV Caledonian Isles, the summer timetable for 2024 will be supported by two vessels rather than three as usual; further understands that this has led to a severe reduction in capacity for both passengers and vehicles on the route, as the MV Isle of Arran operates a core single vessel timetable on the Ardrossan-Brodick route; understands that damage to the Irish Berth at Ardrossan Harbour means that the MV Alfred can no longer operate out of Ardrossan, further reducing route capacity, and notes the calls on the berth's owner, Peel Ports, to work with North Ayrshire Council, CalMac, CMAL and the Scottish Government to resolve any ongoing disputes surrounding port maintenance; considers that the Ardrossan-Brodick ferry is the busiest ferry route in Scotland, carrying 692,518 passengers in 2022; emphasises what it considers to be the importance of the tourism industry to Arran's communities; notes the calls for all political parties to ensure that Ardrossan remains the principal port for the Arran route in the long term; understands that the MV Isle of Arran is 40 years old, whilst the MV Caledonian Isles is 31 years old; notes with concern the recently announced delays to the delivery of the Glen Sannox vessel to the route; understands that CalMac paid out £454,165 in 2022-23 in compensation to passengers for delays or cancellations, which was almost eight times the £57,822 paid out in 2017-18; further understands that, between 2017 and 2023, 6,302 sailings were cancelled due to technical issues; understands that the age and condition of CalMac's vessels has led to a deficiency of spare capacity and resilience across the network; notes the calls for adequate and timely investment to boost the resilience of the fleet, including the commission of the small vessel replacement programme as soon as possible and a prompt resolution to the CHFS contract award that better meets the needs of island communities, and expresses sympathy with islanders who are affected most by disruption to sailings.

12:48

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I repeat the Deputy Presiding Officer's request that people leave quietly, because my voice is going and I do not want to have to shout.

I thank those members who signed my motion to allow this debate to take place. In seven days' time, this Parliament will rise for summer recess, and our ability to publicly hold ministers to account will be vastly diminished until September. However, for our constituents, life goes on. For the next two months, it will be peak season for Scottish tourism and Scotland's island communities, so I make absolutely no apology for using one of our final members' business debates before recess to discuss the issue of ferries. While we on the mainland will complain about traffic jams as we go about our summer business, our islanders would be grateful for the luxury of slow-moving contraflows.

We can never overestimate the disruption that comes with cancelled ferries, which is why, for many years, I and so many others have relentlessly campaigned on the issue in this Parliament. Since I was first elected, I have asked 115 questions on ferries and have made 180 contributions on that subject in the chamber or in committee. It is astonishing that, nearly a decade on, many of the problems that we debated back when I was first elected are still not resolved; in many ways, they are even worse.

None of that is the fault of islanders, who are beleaguered and have long since lost trust in the Government to fix their ferry services. Neither is it the fault of CalMac Ferries staff, who are part of the fabric of the communities that they sail between and that they serve day in, day out.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers was absolutely right in its submission: abuse of staff on any scale is simply unacceptable. Our ports and the communities around them are the beating hearts of the islands that they serve. Tourists come and go; residents commute to and fro; goods, cattle and produce are exported and imported. CalMac itself, as a ferry operator, has been dealt its hand in this awful game of maritime Jenga because of its ever-ageing fleet, the slow replacement of new vessels, an exploding maintenance bill, stiflingly prescriptive routes and a lack of investment in our port infrastructure.

As far back as 2016, when I joined the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee—as it was then—we as a committee blew up the very notion that the status quo back then was delivering value for money or reliable services. The unholy triangle that was created between CalMac, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Transport Scotland, and the intertwining lines of responsibility between those bodies and ministers, simply laid bare the reality that Scotland's lifeline ferry services were being governed by the most complicated and unproductive quango quagmire in Scottish public body history. At the time, ministers vaguely

accepted that damning indictment, and vaguely promised that they would fix those problems—so much so that they introduced the ironically named Islands (Scotland) Bill, which was supposed to put at the centre of public policy the needs of our island communities.

For the past eight years, islanders have lost faith in not just their local politicians but the entire political system. As the old ditty says:

“No man is an island.”

Well, he is if he is stuck on Arran and his ferry has been cancelled.

Here we are, in mid-2024, and this is the reality. For 2017, the vessel maintenance bill was £20 million. Last year, it was more than £42 million. In 2017, £58,000 was paid out in compensation to passengers—fair enough. Last year, that figure topped—wait for it—£0.5 million. That is a tenfold increase. Over the same period, 6,000 sailings have been cancelled for technical reasons alone—nothing to do with our notoriously fickle Scottish weather.

Our islanders do not expect much. They do not expect miracles on high seas and in high winds. They just want things to work when they are supposed to. Is that too much to ask?

Of course, the two new flagship ferries that we desperately await, which should have cost £100 million on an apparently fixed-price contract, now sit at a cost of nearly four times that. If we consider the written-off loans, the fat-cat pay-offs and the consultancy fees, that cost might hit nearly £0.5 billion—for just two ferries. To be honest, I think that 10 small ferries could have been got for the same price. Perhaps the Government, which permanently pleads the poverty of the public purse, might reflect on that.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does Jamie Greene recognise that, as well as the issues with CalMac, there is a ticking time bomb of ferry replacement needs in ferry fleets right across Scotland, including a lot of internal ferry fleets such as in Orkney and Shetland, and that it will cost billions to replace them all?

Jamie Greene: As I said, the maintenance bill is on the increase. There are ferries scooting about our waters that are older than me, which is saying something.

What about the contracts that operate those services? Let us look at the west coast ferry contract. That contract was due for renewal in September this year, but it will not be renewed until perhaps September next year, although it seems to be endlessly delayed under the smokescreen of what I think is nearly a decade-old argument over the state aid rules on whether it

can be awarded direct—yet, we still have no decision and no clarification.

I do not now have a personal view on the direct award. I used to, because I always thought that a competitive public procurement exercise would deliver value for money and bring out the best in the incumbent. The last time that CalMac was awarded that contract, it made 350 specific improvement commitments to our island communities, which was admirable. However, I then learned that Transport Scotland did not track progress on any of those. Many of them are yet to be delivered, which is probably not the fault of CalMac, either. Therefore I say to the minister that, before we hand the next contract to CalMac on a plate, we should be realistic about what it can deliver, given its ever-ageing fleet and crumbling ports.

And we wonder why CalMac's chief executive left. Coming into his job must have been much like becoming the boss of a new airline, only to discover that the aeroplane manufacturer cannot deliver new aircraft, the maintenance workers cannot source any parts, the airports cannot look after the runways, and the Government will force routes and prices on the airline. In any other sector that would be a recipe for disaster. Private operators such as Western Ferries can deliver reliable and cost-effective routes to, for example, Dunoon, at no cost to the public purse, but we cannot get a reliable service to Cumbrae, which involves a journey so short that even I could swim it on a good day—perhaps.

We expect our islanders to say, "Ah, well. It is what it is. That is island life." However, we should make no bones about it: our islands are suffering. Passenger numbers on the Ardrrossan to Arran route have plummeted by 150,000 journeys in three years. North Ayrshire Council tells us that ferry problems cost businesses £170,000 per day in lost revenue. One business has reported losing nearly £500,000—that is the lost revenue of just one business, on just one island, when there are ferry problems. Let me clear, though, that our islands are open for business, because back benchers will accuse many of us of scaremongering by simply stating the reality of those facts. However, the financial and social costs of such disruptions are real.

Since I first took my oath in the Parliament we have had seven transport ministers and three First Ministers. We have had countless damning reports and audits of endless and very public failures. There have been lots of words, and lots of apologies, but there has not been enough listening. That is down to the Government's failure to deliver a robust, reliable and long-term plan for our islands. It is by far the single biggest failure of duty towards our islands. I take no pleasure in

saying that, and I make no apologies for bringing the matter to Parliament again.

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

12:57

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Jamie Greene on securing the debate.

There are

"parts of the media—and the opposition parties—who can't find a good word to say about the ferries in order to attack the Government, before loudly proclaiming how awful it is that confidence in the service is being lost and that island communities are suffering as a result."

Those are the words of Tiree-based columnist Rhoda Meek, in a recent article that called attention to people relentlessly attacking the Scottish Government and CalMac over ferries and then expressing surprise about potential island visitors losing confidence and island businesses being damaged.

As an MSP who represents island communities in Arran and Cumbrae, I have hardly been shy about criticising CalMac, the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland when it has been appropriate to do so. However, today's obviously party-political motion, which was lodged a fortnight after the Prime Minister announced a general election, fools no one.

For the avoidance of doubt, we should not pretend that there are no issues with our ferry network. We need a more island-centred, island-based perspective on such issues. However, we also need to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of CalMac staff, who operate in difficult circumstances, and the incredible work that they do on behalf of passengers, whether they be islanders or visitors to the islands.

I come back to the motion's mention of Opposition parties. I note that, last week, Mr Greene complained that no Scottish National Party MSP had signed his motion, which is laughable given that Tory members have a policy of refusing to support SNP members' motions. Mr Greene's motion introduces absolutely nothing new, and it even makes reference to having this debate

"ahead of the busy summer ... season"

when we are already in that season.

The Arran and Cumbrae economies rely heavily on tourism. Any politician who today proclaims that chaos and disarray exist in the network does so in the clear knowledge that they will undermine the confidence of the visitors on whom those economies rely. There should be a very good reason for their doing so.

The motion refers to the MV Caledonian Isles being out of action until August and to delays to the delivery of the MV Glen Sannox. Those issues have been known about for months. It also mentions

“damage to the Irish Berth at Ardrossan Harbour”.

Not only was that situation announced in February, but the motion’s wording implicitly accepts the ridiculous notion that Peel Ports put forward, which was that the berth’s closure had been caused by CalMac vessels overusing it, as opposed to its own failure to maintain the harbour adequately. In the words of CalMac’s then CEO, Robbie Drummond,

“It’s a berth. That’s what it’s for.”

I appreciate that Mr Greene might not be on top of stakeholder opinion, but why bring a debate to the chamber to bring up long-standing fare issues during the summer season?

The motion’s call for Ardrossan to remain the principal port for Arran helps to guide us towards a motivation other than perceived political advantage, because we were set for a decision on the future of Ardrossan harbour two weeks ago. By calling a snap election, Mr Greene’s party ensured that an announcement was blocked, thanks to the purdah rules imposed on Scottish Government announcements. Deliberations took place on the very day that Mr Greene circulated his motion.

Jamie Greene: Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: If I can have the time back, I am more than happy to take an intervention.

Jamie Greene: There were two reasons why I lodged this motion for debate in this Parliament—first, because the Government has not and, secondly, because Mr Gibson does not have the backbone to.

Kenneth Gibson: That is absolutely pitiful. I was raising issues against my own Government as necessary long before you were even elected as a list member. When were you even last in Arran?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: The fleet has issues. It is ageing and it lacks resilience. Community involvement and engagement are at an all-time low. Arran has borne the brunt of the latest round of disruption, while Cumbrae has had to endure a series of technical faults with vessels serving on the Millport to Largs route. A decision on the small vessel replacement programme cannot come quickly enough, but, sadly, today’s debate has nothing to do with a desire to solve any of those issues. It is about a press release from Mr Greene

and attacking the Scottish Government and CalMac.

The Tories have been opportunistic on this for years. They mentioned ferries in only two of their first four Holyrood manifestos, one of which called for a budget cut for ferries. If we look at what is happening where they are in power, we should perhaps think about the RMV Scillonian III, which has been waiting for a replacement for many years. It was built in 1977, so it is eight years older than any Scottish ferry, but the Tories refuse to replace it in one of their own constituencies.

It is disappointing that this overtly partisan debate has been brought to the chamber, but those of us who represent and visit our island communities regularly and speak to stakeholders will certainly do our very best for our constituents. This motion is politics at its most base and cynical level, and I have little choice but to call it out as such.

13:02

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Jamie Greene on securing the debate, and I was pleased to sign the motion to give cross-party support to enable the debate to take place. I believe that our constituents think that it is appropriate that we debate these issues before the summer recess.

I, too, am a West Scotland list MSP, I was the MP for North Ayrshire and Arran between 2005 and 2015 and I currently work out of a regional office in Ardrossan, just a few hundred yards from the Ardrossan ferry port. I have therefore represented the islands of Cumbrae and Arran for a number of years and, like other members, I receive regular representations about the ferry service.

It is clear that the problems on the ferry routes have increased significantly in recent years, which has had a massive impact on the lives of islanders, the island economies and, indeed, island tourism. Scottish Labour research found that the number of non-weather-related cancellations trebled in just five years by 237 per cent. CalMac cancelled 1,301 sailings in 2022, which represented an increase of 44 per cent since 2018. There is no doubt about the scale of the problem. Between 2015 and 2023, 6,302 sailings were cancelled for specific technical reasons. The average age of the 37 vessels that are leased to CalMac is 24 years.

There should be consensus across the chamber that we face a significant crisis and that we have to find solutions, ideally on a cross-party basis. Last year, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee reported high levels of dissatisfaction among users. Issues that were cited included

missed school hours, disrupted attendance at medical appointments, the inability to care for ill relatives and friends, cancelled holidays and a range of other problems.

All of us have received representations about things such as bare shelves in supermarkets on Arran over the festive period and representations from constituents outside Arran and Cumbrae about the impact of that on people who holiday on the islands.

The Arran route from Ardrossan is, of course, the busiest route on the network, and its future is currently under threat. The Ardrossan route has been the main route to Arran for 190 years, as it is the shortest, quickest and most convenient route, and transport and infrastructure have developed around it. Therefore, there is strong support for maintaining Ardrossan as the main port for Arran, but the poor condition of the port, particularly the Irish berth, is already causing significant problems. Peel Ports's closure of the port means that the MV Alfred can operate only from Troon. That leaves the 40-year-old MV Isle of Arran serving the route from Ardrossan.

On the Largs to Cumbrae route, the normal vessel—the MV Loch Shira—has been out of service since April, and a succession of vessels have served the route. Construction will not start on a replacement vessel for that route until 2026. I hope that the Glen Sannox will come into service soon, because it is clear that that will have a massive impact. However, crewing levels and cabin space have still not been agreed with the relevant trade unions, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers is raising concerns. Given all the other problems that we have had with those issues, I urge the cabinet secretary to ensure that that is addressed and that there is an agreement on staffing levels as a matter of urgency.

Scottish Labour supports a direct award to provide long-term certainty for islanders and the workforce. We urge the Government to include trade unions, including the RMT, in its due diligence in delivering a long-term contract to CalMac. Tendering will not take place within the 12-month framework that the extension provides. We need certainty so that we can focus on the service that islanders receive and ensure that we have a robust and reliable service in the future that will, I hope, be operated in a way that genuinely provides the cross-party support that we need for such services.

13:07

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate Jamie Greene on securing this debate. His motion is one of the longest that I

have ever read—it would take me nearly three minutes to read it out. I think that I need to give him a lesson on how to make a point succinctly.

To answer what Kenneth Gibson said, it is perfectly in order for any member to lodge a motion of this nature. In Jamie Greene's case, the motion is of local interest. We can also lodge motions of national interest.

Jamie Greene has raised a number of important points about the reliability of ferries in his patch and the future of Ardrossan as the port for the Arran service. On reliability, the issue of the age of the CalMac fleet has been well rehearsed, as has the issue of the age of ferries elsewhere, as Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned.

Goodness knows when we will see the two ferries that are being built at the Ferguson yard enter service. The complexity of the build and the fact that they have to use liquefied natural gas as well as diesel have no doubt contributed to delays and costs. The SNP's green credentials are shattered by the insistence on having a greenhouse gas-emitting fuel that has to be shipped in from Europe and brought up here by road from the south coast. Why ferries that cannot fit into Ardrossan were ordered without any agreement in place to make the harbour ready for them is beyond comprehension.

I see no prospect of Ardrossan being used any time soon. Having listened to Kenneth Gibson, I hope that I am proved wrong and that there is some announcement after the election. I think that the islanders of Arran and anyone who wants to get there had better get used to going to and from Troon, where there has been investment, and I think that most people understand that.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does Mr Simpson agree that we need to consider every port in moving forward with the ferries, to ensure that the infrastructure is in place for the fleet of smaller vessels, which will be electric? We have to ensure that the infrastructure is in place. Otherwise, we will keep having these problems.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr Simpson.

Graham Simpson: I thank Alex Rowley for making that intervention, as he is absolutely right. When we order those small ferries, we would hope that they will be electric. I think that that is the plan. Clearly, the ports have to be ready for that. Alex Rowley is quite correct.

The cabinet secretary will say, I am sure, that we have six ferries on their way. That is true, and it is to be welcomed. Those include the two Ferguson ones and the four that are being built, on time and on budget, in Turkey. They will provide greater reliance for the CalMac fleet, and we will

get even more when the order for the seven small ferries is placed. There needs to be a decision on that as soon as the general election campaign is over. In fact, I think that that should have happened before now. Whoever gets that contract—it could go to more than one yard, of course—needs to be able to build the vessels on time and to deliver value for money for islanders.

The Ferguson yard is better placed to build smaller vessels than larger ones, but it requires investment. The former chief executive officer David Tydeman was very clear about that before he was sacked for doing his job. We are yet to hear what the so-called performance issues were that he was accused of by the board chairman—formerly of the massively successful Prestwick airport. The truth will out one day.

Anyway, when I attended the Ferguson's summit in Greenock with Kate Forbes and others, we were very clear that a decision on that investment needed to be taken within days. It is now over a month later, and nothing has happened, so Ms Forbes and Ms Hyslop need to have their ducks in a row and be ready to work with the rest of us on the two key decisions that I have outlined within the next month.

Jamie Greene is right to raise the issues that he has raised today. I hope that the islanders he represents—and those he does not represent—start to see a better service soon, as they have been let down for too long.

13:12

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank my colleagues for raising the ongoing issues with CalMac ferry services, and I thank Jamie Greene for securing the debate.

Some of the speeches that we have heard lay bare the consequences of decades of underinvestment and short-term thinking when it comes to our lifeline ferry networks. Our island communities are not just bustling tourist attractions; they are living, breathing communities whose very existence relies on resilient ferry connections. Every cancelled sailing disrupts lives, with missed medical appointments, unstocked shelves and workers unable to reach their jobs. This summer's capacity reductions are unacceptable.

My constituents in the Highlands and Islands know all too well that the present crisis has been years in the making. The age of our vessels is not just a number; it is a reflection of our commitment to those who rely on our maritime arteries. The MV Isle of Arran is 40 years old, and the Maid of Glencoul, one of the vessels operating the Corran ferry in my region, which is the busiest ferry route in Scotland, will celebrate its golden anniversary in

just two years. Although 48 years of service is a credit to the skill of the Clyde shipyard workers and the durability of their work, I am sure that no one in 1976 imagined that their vessel would still be operating in 2024.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: That was a very good point about the Maid of Glencoul and the MV Corran. It is not just island communities that are affected; it is also areas such as the Ardnamurchan peninsula that are suffering. I was there only last weekend, and there were people talking about moving out, so I am pleased that the member made that point.

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

Ariane Burgess: I thank the member for concurring with that.

Those ageing vessels frequently break down, leading to more than 6,000 cancelled sailings since 2017, due to technical faults alone. CalMac had to pay out more than £450,000 last year in passenger compensation, which is eight times the 2017 level. Although the sums involved are a testament to the resilience of our people, they underscore the pressing need for a fleet that can weather the storms of technical issues and climate change.

A fundamental shift is required in order to build resilience and undo the damage of years of neglect. Our weather is getting stormier—a situation that will worsen as climate change begins to bed in—so we need to build climate adaptation into our island transport planning. Farmers, for example, need a ferry booking system that has an alert that lets them know in advance if a ferry is not sailing. Too often, farmers show up with their livestock only to find that they have to turn around and go home. A simple text notification system that communicated information on the morning of the sailing would reduce stress and wasted time for farmers.

It is time for us to chart a course in which the resilience of our fleet matches the indomitable spirit of our communities. The Scottish Green Party has consistently called for investment in low-carbon ferries and in fixed links to future proof our island transport. We need an accelerated small vessel replacement programme to deliver ferries that meet community needs, not just those of tourists. Many communities have their own answers for how to resolve the situation, from significant investment in fixed links to more small-scale adjustments, such as reduced fares and more reserved slots for islanders. They understand the potential of improved ferry connections to boost our island economies, reverse depopulation and build a resilient sustainable transport network that is befitting of a

thriving island nation. Another summer of disruption must be a wake-up call.

I share the concerns that have been expressed by colleagues and the RMT that the motion ignores the role of workers in delivering lifeline ferry services in the west of Scotland, which have been compromised by the procurement failures of successive governments. The Scottish Greens will work constructively with all parties—CalMac, trade unions and communities—to design the long-term solutions that our islanders desperately need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Fiona Hyslop to respond to the debate.

13:16

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I start by expressing my thanks to the CalMac crew and front-line staff for their work in delivering lifeline services across the network. As the First Minister noted last week, CalMac is a key part of the maritime fabric of the west coast of Scotland. I add my personal thanks to MV Isle of Arran's master and crew for their speedy and professional response during the recent incident when a passenger fell overboard as a vessel approached Ardrossan.

I also thank Jamie Greene for securing this important debate. I agree with Graham Simpson and Kenny Gibson that the points that have been raised in the debate have been well rehearsed, but it gives me an opportunity to share with the Parliament as much as I can in the current circumstances. Jamie Halcro Johnston and Ariane Burgess raised issues about council-run ferries, which are not the subject of the motion, so I will focus on west coast ferries.

Scottish ministers accept that, on a number of routes, including the Arran route, communities are not getting the service and capacity that they deserve. That is why we are focused on improving the way that we deliver those services. That includes investment in new tonnage, with six new major vessels due by 2026, and a focus on improved community voice through our intent to directly award the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract to CalMac. I fully understand and appreciate how much the Arran community and economy rely on the ferry service. We are working hard to make improvements and to address the current challenges. I welcome the input and on-going work of the Arran ferry committee in representing the island on ferry issues.

However, it is essential to reiterate the message that Arran is open for business, and encourage people, including foot passengers, to plan and book ahead in order to allow travel on their required sailing, particularly at peak times. I urge people to explore all options that are currently

available for travelling to and from Arran, which include the Ardrossan or Troon to Brodick route, as well as the Claonaig to Lochranza route. I have been assured by CalMac that the MV Caledonian Isles is expected to return to service in August, and that the return-to-service date will be announced in due course.

Meanwhile, to support Arran and to provide much-needed capacity at this busy time, Scottish ministers have provided funding for the charter of the MV Alfred, including additional funding to secure extra crew and allow the vessel's full capacity to be used. Although that still means that there will be a reduced available passenger and vehicle deck capacity, we continue to look at options to make further improvements. That includes planned work by CalMac to allow MV Alfred to take an increased range of vehicle types, maximising services on the secondary route from Lochranza to Claonaig, and work by CMAL, Argyll and Bute Council and other partners to explore possible improvements on the slickway to assist vehicle movement. Although the current situation is far from ideal, I hope that Mr Greene can recognise our efforts to support Arran's connectivity while MV Caledonian Isles is receiving its extensive repairs.

With regard to Ardrossan port, we have been progressing the Ardrossan business case and cost exercise, and I have met Arran stakeholders as well as convening a task force meeting. At that meeting, members, including Kenneth Gibson MSP, shared their views on the ferry service, making the case for remaining at Ardrossan and for a decision on that to be taken as soon as possible. I assure colleagues that the business case is substantially complete, and Transport Scotland is working with funding partners to finalise it. We do not anticipate an announcement on the project until after the pre-election period.

During my visits and meetings with island communities, they made it clear to me that they—rightly—have high expectations of transport services to meet their transport connectivity needs. The most immediate priority is to ensure that we have reliable and resilient ferry fleets, and that is clear in the draft islands connectivity plan and reflected in the feedback to the public consultation, which recently closed.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the cabinet secretary consider that there may be an extension, or has any extension been considered, for the MV Alfred, given that it has been taken off its normal route in Orkney?

Fiona Hyslop: With regard to considerations, those discussions will take place between CalMac and the owners of MV Alfred and will include reflection on capacity needs, capability and the return of MV Caledonian Isles.

I can assure members that the Government will take all issues very seriously. With regard to MV Alfred and MV Arrow, we have provided additional resilience and capacity across the network to date.

Members will know that the two new vessels, MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa, have been secured for the Arran community, and that on 31 May, the new interim CEO of Ferguson Marine updated Parliament on progress with the vessels.

Katy Clark: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: Very briefly.

Katy Clark: Would the cabinet secretary be willing to look at the issues that the RMT is raising in relation to crewing levels on the Glen Sannox and the issue of due diligence in relation to the direct award?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop: I have already said in an answer in the chamber that I meet regularly the ferry unions and they have direct input in relation to the award. They raised the issue of crewing levels some time back, and I know that Transport Scotland will make sure that, in preparing for the roll-out of the new ferries, that issue will be addressed.

Consideration of the business case and the procurement approach for the small vessel replacement programme is on-going. Due to the pre-election guidance, we will not be able to make any announcement on the SVRP before early July. We recognise the importance of that project and will—as Mr Simpson requested—confirm the position as soon as possible.

The motion mentions the new Clyde and Hebrides ferry service contract. I refer members to the answer that was given to the Parliament on 30 May. I have agreed to the implementation of an extension of the current contract of up to 12 months to enable the relevant due diligence work, and the associated Scottish Government assurance processes to be concluded prior to a final decision being made on the next CHFS contract. I was clear that the extension period would not be simply business as usual, and Transport Scotland is already working with CalMac to develop an enhancement and change plan with a consensus on the areas that will be addressed during the extension. Those include enhanced community voice, improved transparency through performance reporting, strengthened regionalisation and enhanced customer satisfaction.

As community engagement will be essential throughout the life of these services, I met the ferries community board on 12 June to discuss its

priorities, and Transport Scotland is engaging with the board to explore how its role can be enhanced.

The current situation is a challenge, as we undoubtedly know. However, it is important that we highlight the six new vessels that will be delivered by 2026 to serve not just Arran, but Islay and the Little Minch, and which will have an impact across the whole network. I also look forward to seeing the improvements that will be realised through the new CHFS arrangements and the delivery of the islands connectivity plan.

I reiterate that we must all get behind our islands and say with a united voice that they are open for business.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:24

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio is social justice. As ever, I would appreciate succinct questions and answers in order to allow as many members as possible to ask their questions.

Homelessness (Veterans)

1. **Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the housing minister has had with ministerial colleagues regarding support available for veterans at risk of homelessness. (S6O-03605)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans attends the ministerial oversight group on homelessness, which I chair, in order to make connections across portfolios. The group last met on 5 June 2024, and it has met four times previously.

Working alongside the veterans minister, I am committed to raising the profile of veterans' housing and homelessness at relevant meetings to ensure that stakeholders are aware of their obligations to provide veterans in Scotland with the best possible advice and support. I have had similar discussions with the Scottish veterans commissioner and veterans housing organisations.

Maurice Golden: Veterans often struggle to navigate the myriad support available to them, whether it be for homelessness, addiction or access to employment. Would the Scottish Government consider co-ordinating and documenting all the support that is available, to create a one-stop shop for veterans' support?

Paul McLennan: I am happy to have a discussion about that with Maurice Golden. We have previously had discussions about housing options and organisations that do that job in Edinburgh. I am happy to pick that up for other parts of Scotland and to see what we can do on that issue.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Following Poppy Scotland's successful count them in campaign, census information on the number of veterans in Scotland has recently been published for the first time. How does the Scottish Government plan to use that information to better support veterans, including through preventing homelessness?

Paul McLennan: The inclusion of a question on veteran status in the census for the first time marked a significant step forward in developing the evidence base on veterans in Scotland and their characteristics. In conjunction with our annual national homelessness statistics, officials will analyse the census outputs, which we will use to consider how we continue to support veterans and their families. A further update on our work to use emerging evidence to understand more about the circumstances and needs of veterans will be provided in the veterans minister's next annual update to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 2 is from James Dornan, who joins us online.

Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund

2. **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact the second round of the child poverty practice accelerator fund is anticipated to have in advancing the First Minister's mission to eradicate child poverty in Scotland. (S6O-03606)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I was delighted last week to announce round 2 of the child poverty practice accelerator fund, which supports the First Minister's mission to eradicate child poverty. We will make available up to £500,000 this financial year to support projects to test new and innovative ways to support the mission. That builds on the fund's first round, launched in 2023, which is supporting a range of work, including important early intervention. Local authorities and health boards are already undertaking transformative work to tackle child poverty, and the fund supports them to go further to address root causes.

James Dornan: The child poverty practice accelerator fund demonstrates how real investment in eradicating child poverty benefits families, our society and our economy. Under the plans put forward by the major Westminster parties, however, it seems that both the Tories and Labour are unwilling to make that investment, instead opting for low taxes for high earners and painful public spending cuts. Will the cabinet secretary outline what actions she and the Scottish Government require from the incoming United Kingdom Government if we are to achieve the First Minister's mission to end child poverty in Scotland for good?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the First Minister and I have said in the chamber before, we stand ready to work with an incoming UK Government to not only tackle but eradicate child poverty. Mr Dornan is quite right to point out the choices that make that more difficult. As he said, both of the major Westminster parties are focusing on low

taxes for high earners and painful public spending cuts, rather than the eradication of child poverty.

Given that, this year, the Scottish Government has committed more than £3 billion to policies to tackle poverty, it is disappointing that no change has yet been suggested down at Westminster. It is inevitable that that will make the Scottish Government's job more difficult, but we are determined to do what we can within the fixed financial envelope that we have and the powers that are available to the Parliament.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The scale of the challenge that we face in Scotland is serious. As poverty levels have been static for the 17 years of this Scottish National Party Government, attempts to find new and effective approaches are welcome, but stakeholders will be concerned about how frustratingly slow the turnaround often is between learning about good practice and implementing it across the country. Indeed, in its recent report, the Poverty and Inequality Commission said that, in its next update on the child poverty figures, the Scottish Government

“cannot just point to actions already taken nor propose more small-scale tests of change.”

How will the cabinet secretary ensure that learning from the accelerator fund is used nationwide to give us whatever chance is left of meeting the statutory 2030 targets?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government remains absolutely committed to achieving the child poverty targets that have been laid down in statute. At the moment, the effect that the Scottish child payment is having is not yet showing up in the child poverty statistics, but our modelling suggests that it is having a very important impact.

What will not help is the £18 billion-worth of cuts that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that the spending plans of both Labour and the Conservatives will make in our public services. *[Interruption.]* That makes it more—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat for a second, cabinet secretary. I will not have sedentary chitchat across the benches while someone else is speaking.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That makes it more difficult for us to eradicate child poverty. However, as I said in my original answer, we are determined to do everything that we can. Children and families in Scotland deserve no less of this Government or, indeed, of any incoming UK Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Hostel Safety

4. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that homeless women are not safe in hostels. (S6O-03608)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): It is vital that the use of emergency accommodation for women who are experiencing homelessness does not exacerbate any of the issues that may have led to them presenting as homeless, such as domestic abuse, mental health issues, substance use or a disability or impairment.

Temporary accommodation is an important safety net and, when support services are provided, care must be taken to ensure the safety of everyone who is accommodated. Our homelessness statistics show that accommodation in the social rented sector is the most common type of temporary accommodation that is used by local authorities. Social rented accommodation accounts for 55 per cent of the temporary accommodation that is used by local authorities, with hostels being used in only a small number—9 per cent—of cases.

Ash Regan: The most recent figures, which go up to 2022, show that 67 women in Scotland had died in homeless accommodation over a three-year period. The fact that the situation is getting steadily worse as a result of systemic failure is acknowledged by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Sinead Watson, a 33-year-old woman who spent 40 weeks in homeless accommodation, spoke of her experience. She said:

“Over the past months, I have stayed in three separate hostels. I have been threatened, assaulted and robbed. I have had no sense of security or safety, and women with addiction are bribed into sex. I saw it in all three hostels that I stayed in. The women in these hostels are fair game.”

We urgently need to provide safe and secure same-sex emergency housing to stop more women dying. That would be a simple first step in ensuring that these vulnerable women in crisis are not put at further risk of rape, sexual assault and trauma.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Regan, we need a question.

Ash Regan: Will the Government commit to protecting vulnerable women in crisis by ensuring that temporary accommodation in Scotland is single sex?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Ash Regan for raising such an important point and pointing out the trauma that women are going through.

The Scottish Government is committed to dignity and respect for all. The Equality Act 2010

provides protection for women. The Scottish Government strongly supports the separate and single-sex exceptions that are in the 2010 act, which allow for women to have single-sex spaces.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I agree with Ash Regan. The Government needs to understand the facts of what people are experiencing. The minister mentioned a figure of 9 per cent, but in Edinburgh it is much higher. People are being mixed together in unacceptable situations: families, single men, and women who are experiencing homelessness. Often, those women have fled domestic abuse but are put into those situations, and they then leave them to become homeless, because they feel safer on the streets. Will the minister look at reviewing the situation, and get the third sector to be part of that? In so many options out there, we do not use the third sector, and it wants to be part of a solution.

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government's delivering equally safe fund is providing more than £7 million this year to local women's aid groups for support for services for women and children.

We have introduced provisions in the Housing (Scotland) Bill that, if passed, will put a duty on social landlords to develop and implement a domestic abuse policy that outlines how they will support their tenants who are at risk of homelessness, including protecting the right of women to stay safely in their own homes. We will continue to work closely with the housing and violence against women and girls sectors to develop statutory guidance to accompany that duty.

RAAC (Social Housing)

5. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many homes provided by social landlords have been identified as containing reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6O-03609)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Housing Regulator has been engaging with social landlords to understand the context of RAAC in their properties. The latest figures from the regulator show that 13 social landlords have identified the presence of RAAC, and 1,994 homes are affected.

Richard Leonard: Last week, we marked the seventh anniversary of the Grenfell tower tragedy. It has taken the Scottish Government seven years to bring forward and get passed the Housing (Cladding Remediation) (Scotland) Act 2024. In seven years, only two multistorey dwellings in Scotland—out of more than 100—have had any remedial action taken to remove inflammable cladding. People have been evacuated from their homes, from Tillicoultry to Torry, because of the

dangers of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. How long will they have to wait? What is the Government's timescale for ensuring that all those living with RAAC in their homes, across Scotland, are safe?

Paul McLennan: There are a number of issues in that. The cladding issue is similar in some ways to RAAC, but it is different in many other ways. RAAC can be present in buildings without posing an immediate risk. I have engaged with a number of local authorities—for example, West Lothian Council and Aberdeen City Council—over the specific options that they are looking at. We await option appraisals from a number of local authorities. I meet them regularly on the subject.

As I have said, there are specific guidelines to recommend whether a property is safe. I will continue to engage with local authorities in that regard, and with the regulator. I am happy to discuss that further with Mr Leonard.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Given that the Scottish budget is already stretched to the limit by Westminster capital spending cuts, will the minister call on the incoming United Kingdom Government to prioritise a dedicated RAAC fund as a matter of urgency, with appropriate consequential for Scotland?

Paul McLennan: As members will be aware, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had committed to "spend what it takes"

to deal with the issue of RAAC. However, no funding has been forthcoming, and neither the Labour Party nor the Conservatives have committed to any financial support in their election manifestos. In addition, the UK Government failed to inflation-proof its capital budget, which has resulted in nearly a 9 per cent real-terms cut in our UK capital funding between 2023-24 and 2027-28. I hope that members across the chamber will join me in calling on an incoming UK Government to deliver a dedicated fund. [*Interruption.*] I can hear Mr Leonard talking about that. If he can speak to, and use any influence that he has, with an incoming UK chancellor or UK housing minister, I will be happy to discuss that with him.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, this is not a free-for-all across the chamber. Speak through the chair, please. Thank you.

Emergency Accommodation (West Scotland)

6. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the provision of emergency homeless accommodation in the West Scotland region. (S6O-03610)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Scotland has the strongest rights in the United

Kingdom for people who are experiencing homelessness. Local authorities have a duty to provide temporary accommodation to any homeless household that needs it. In some cases, that might be done on an emergency basis. Local authorities are responsible for assessing demand for temporary accommodation and provision in their areas. Recent homelessness statistics show that local authorities in the West Scotland region consistently provide temporary accommodation to people who require it. We have maintained the homeless budget at broadly similar levels to last year's. I regularly meet housing conveners across Scotland to understand the pressures in their areas, including the demand for temporary accommodation. We last met on Tuesday. In addition, I met representatives of Glasgow City Council this morning to discuss that specific issue.

Russell Findlay: Two weeks ago, I attended a meeting with Police Scotland and others about a hotel in Paisley being used as emergency accommodation. Local families are living in fear due to regular outbreaks of violence and blatant drug dealing. Police are never far away from the place. The authorities wrongly downplay that as antisocial behaviour, which it is not—it is criminality. One woman told the *Paisley Daily Express* that occupants are

“drinking, smoking, smashing glass, swearing and making abusive comments to people, particularly women and kids when they go past. It's unpleasant and threatening.”

What, if anything, can the Scottish Government do to end that misery for residents?

Paul McLennan: I will add some context. Local authorities in the West Scotland region, which Mr Findlay represents, are receiving more than £1 million of funding for rapid rehousing transition plans. I would be happy to pick up the issue of the particular property that he has referred to. It has not been fed back to me, but I would be happy to liaise with him on that and take it up with officials.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The erosion of UK Government benefits, including housing benefits, is a significant driver for homelessness and the need for emergency accommodation in Glasgow, the west of Scotland and beyond. Has the Scottish Government made any assessment of the record £90 million of discretionary housing payments that it has provided to mitigate those cuts? Does the minister agree that the key way to support homelessness prevention and to avoid emergency accommodation in the first place is for any incoming UK Government to significantly uplift housing benefits, which have been gutted by a decade of Tory austerity?

Paul McLennan: I fully agree with Bob Doris's statement. His view is backed up by a recent report by Crisis through its homelessness monitor

study, which picked up that two of the biggest issues are local housing allowance and the rate of universal credit. This year, the Scottish Government has increased the funding for discretionary housing payments by £6.8 million, to provide additional support for households who are struggling to meet housing costs. Discretionary housing payments are a vital tool to reduce poverty, safeguard tenancies and prevent homelessness. However, the fact that we need to spend that money at all shows that the UK welfare system is not fit for purpose. We will continue to push whichever party forms the next Westminster Government to end the bedroom tax, scrap the benefit cap, and permanently link local housing allowance rates with rents, to end the uncertainty that private renters face.

Poverty (Black and Ethnic Minority Households)

7. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle poverty in black and minority ethnic households. (S6O-03611)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Despite Scotland receiving the most challenging settlement in the history of devolution in last year's United Kingdom Government budget, the Scottish Government is doing all that it can to prioritise investment to tackle and reduce poverty here, including investment that will benefit black and minority ethnic households. That includes committing £6.3 billion for social security benefits and payments, investing nearly £600 million to support the delivery of affordable homes and providing more than £370 million to enable free bus travel for more than 2 million people. In addition, our anti-racist employment strategy seeks to reduce income inequality for racialised minorities by supporting employers to address barriers so that people from such minorities can enter, progress in and stay in employment.

Pam Gosal: According to the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, underemployment disproportionately affects black and minority ethnic communities, with underemployment severely contributing to the growing proportion of families in in-work poverty. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that high-quality and secure work is made available for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds?

Kaukab Stewart: I have already referred to the Government's anti-racist employment strategy, which I believe is having an impact. It sets out the actions that the Scottish Government will take to reduce employment inequalities for racialised minorities. They include evaluation of the minority ethnic recruitment toolkit that we published in 2020, and the development of an anti-racist

workplace training framework. The impact of those actions will be measured through the evidence plan for the fair work action plan, to ensure that they support our ambition of becoming a fair work nation.

Benefits (Expenditure)

8. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of Audit Scotland's analysis showing that Social Security Scotland's benefit expenditure budget was £5.1 billion in 2023-24, which was an increase of 22 per cent on its 2022-23 budget, what action it is taking to reduce expenditure on Scottish social security benefits, including through assisting people into meaningful paid employment. (S6O-03612)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social security is a priority for this Government, and we are proud of our significant investment to ensure that people receive the support that they are entitled to. When all our benefits have been introduced and clients have been transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions, Social Security Scotland will support around one in three people in Scotland, the vast majority of whom are disabled and unpaid carers.

We continue to support employment opportunities within the limits of our devolved powers, with up to £90 million for employability services through the no one left behind plan this year, and the remaining delivery of fair start Scotland funding.

Jamie Greene: I am pleased that the minister mentioned those with disabilities in our workforce, for example. One of the points of feedback from Inclusion Scotland was that many people who had to leave the workplace due to the pandemic have struggled to get back into work, and have found the whole process quite daunting. What is the Scottish Government doing to support jobseekers and employers to assist those who have been out of the workplace for a particularly long time to make that move, which can be daunting, and to get them back into the workforce?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Jamie Greene for that question. It is important that we look at the disability employment gap and what can be done. Some of the responsibility and powers for that lie with the Scottish Government and some with the UK Government, and both Governments need to do more on it. We are determined to do just that.

A number of mechanisms and policies are in place—I mentioned no one left behind in my original answer. That is a very important way of making a tailored service available to everybody. The Government also works with employers to

ensure that they recognise the importance and significance of the role that disabled people and their carers can play in the employment market—even those who have perhaps not been in the labour market for some time. That is a commitment that we are absolutely determined to take forward.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On 4 June, in the stage 1 debate on the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, Tory social security spokesperson Jeremy Balfour said:

“As a Parliament, we should be demanding that all benefits in Scotland are inflation proofed.”—[*Official Report*, 4 June 2024; c 28.]

That should be a priority even if our block grant from the UK Government is below inflation. Mr Greene clearly disagrees with that. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is astonishing that the Tories are utterly incapable of speaking with one voice on something as fundamental as Social Security Scotland's budget?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please respond on the matters within your responsibility.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Gibson is quite right to point out the variety of different calls that I receive from the Scottish Conservatives on the issue. In his original question, Jamie Greene seemed to suggest that we may wish or need to cut social security expenditure. I say to the Conservatives and to the Labour Party, which shares its policies on social security with the Conservatives, that the best way that we can do that is through changes in the UK social security system so that we do not have to spend, for example, £134 million a year mitigating some of the worst excesses of the UK Government's system. That would allow the Scottish Government to work to introduce more anti-poverty measures, which we are determined to do. It is disappointing that the current Government—and, I would suggest, any incoming Government—is refusing to take up that challenge.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on social justice. There will be a very short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Provisional Outturn 2023-24

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Ivan McKee on the 2023-24 provisional outturn. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:54

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I welcome the opportunity to update Parliament on the provisional outturn against the budget for the 2023-24 financial year. The provisional outturn demonstrates once again that the Scottish Government is prudently and competently managing Scotland's finances while protecting our priorities and ensuring that we have sustained effective delivery of public services.

Managing the financial position for 2023-24 once again represented a significant challenge. The continued impact of persistently high inflation, combined with pressure on public sector pay, backlogs as a result of the Covid pandemic, and the on-going war in Ukraine have placed pressure on the public finances. In addition, inflationary pressures continued to impact households and businesses across the country.

The Scottish Government's budget must balance each and every financial year. The majority of our funding continues to be tied to the decisions of the United Kingdom Government and, as such, it is subject to high levels of uncertainty until very late in the financial year.

Although the fiscal framework was revised in August 2023 and it offers some additional flexibility, we are still unable to borrow to meet day-to-day costs. Our income tax powers do not allow changes to be made during the current financial year. The only real lever that we have to respond to emerging pressures and ensure that we balance the budget is to reprioritise current year spending plans. No one should underestimate the scale of that challenge. Our spending is committed to supporting vital public services.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government has already made clear to the Parliament some of the difficult choices that had to be taken over the course of this year. With careful management and rigorous reprioritisation, Scottish Government funding has been channelled to where it is most needed.

However, this statement is not just about the challenges that we have had to manage; I also want to underline the positives. We have continued to proactively drive efficiency savings

and to maximise income streams. In 2023-24, we supported fair and affordable pay deals for workers who provide our essential public services, thereby avoiding strike action and minimising further disruption for the people of Scotland. Through meaningful engagement with trade unions and employers, the Scottish Government provided a record junior doctor pay deal and an increased agenda for change pay deal. Over the past two years, we have invested an additional £1 billion in national health service agenda for change pay to support staff through the cost of living crisis.

We spent nearly £5.2 billion on social security benefits, including £429 million on the Scottish child payment. That payment, which is unique to Scotland, lifts families out of poverty and helps with the cost of living crisis.

The carer support payment was introduced in pilot areas. Once it is fully rolled out, in 2024, that will allow thousands more unpaid carers to receive the benefit.

During 2023-24, we also widened the eligibility for best start foods. That will mean that an estimated 20,000 people will be able to access money to help to provide milk and healthy food for their children.

In 2023-24, we spent over £160 million on the Ukrainian resettlement programme to ensure that people continued to receive a warm Scots welcome and were supported to rebuild their lives in our communities for as long as they need to call Scotland home.

We continued to support a strong Scottish economy. The 2023 Ernst & Young attractiveness survey showed that Scotland outpaced both the UK and Europe for the second year in a row in attracting inward investment projects. Indeed, Scotland has been the top-performing part of the UK for inward investment projects outside London for the past eight years.

We continue to outperform the UK as a whole in delivering long-term reductions in Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions in order to achieve net zero emissions by 2045.

Domestically, we have continued support for our multiyear grant funding from the just transition fund, with £16.8 million spent on projects to deliver our just transition aims and positive impacts for the north-east and Moray regions. In addition, in 2023, we committed, allocated and spent another £3 million to support vulnerable global communities to address loss and damage. That brought our total commitment to £10 million.

On rail services, revenue growth exceeded budget forecasts due to effective delivery of services and the benefits of partnership working with the trade unions for the public sector railway.

In Scotland, we avoided the costly industrial relations disruption that impacted other rail operators. Enhanced deployment of customer support teams helped to reduce fare evasion and antisocial behaviour, thereby building customer confidence and increasing revenue.

A continued focus on controlling the costs of delivery has contributed to the improvement of the net cost of delivering Scotland's rail service. The finalisation of the closure of the previous franchise agreement for ScotRail also resulted in a one-off receipt back to the Government from Abellio.

That, and other savings that were generated as part of our work to make our public sector more efficient and to release more funds to the front line, have resulted in savings across a number of portfolios, which have contributed to our underspend in 2023-24. Those savings are welcome, and they are available to support essential services in this financial year.

We will continue to press the UK Government to provide funding to meet pressures and to allow us to deliver a broad range of high-quality public services and to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to delivering on our priorities—priorities that have the most immediate benefits for our people in their everyday lives: eradicating child poverty, growing a thriving economy, ensuring sustainable and excellent public services and tackling the climate emergency.

I now turn to the 2023-24 provisional outturn. Under the current devolution settlement, the Scottish Government is not permitted to overspend its budget. We must therefore operate within a tight margin of just over 1 per cent. The level of volatility in our overall funding envelope continues to increase. Our block grant is not finalised until February each year. We only received confirmation of an additional £500 million of funding just six weeks before the end of the financial year. While we welcome that additional funding, the timing highlights the challenge in managing the financial position.

I am pleased to confirm that, despite that volatility, the Scottish Government has once again delivered a balanced budget, with a provisional fiscal outturn for 2023-24 of £49.3 billion, against a total fiscal budget of £49.6 billion. The remaining budget of £292 million, which represents just 0.6 per cent of our total budget, will be carried forward in full through the Scotland reserve if confirmed at final outturn. That incorporates £162 million of fiscal resource, £130 million of capital and a break-even position in financial transactions.

I must stress that there is no loss of spending power to the Scottish Government as a result of that small underspend. Indeed, £109 million of the

capital underspend was anticipated at the spring budget revision and, of the resource position, around £100 million is required annually to manage the post-year-end audit adjustments, with the remainder to be utilised to support the 2024-25 budget.

In setting out his priorities for Scotland to Parliament in May, the First Minister highlighted the enormous financial pressures facing the Scottish Government. As has been said before, we are required to manage our spend against an annual budget that is not confirmed until the final quarter of the financial year. We cannot overspend. Therefore, our financial strategy is to plan a modest underspend to mitigate the risks of post-year-end audit adjustments, as have occurred in previous years. Managing the position to a 0.6 per cent underspend underlines the financial competence of the Government.

I know that colleagues across the chamber follow these matters closely and that, for the most part, they have a robust understanding of the intricacies of accounting standards. I am sure, therefore, that I do not need to remind them that an element of our budget allocation from HM Treasury is non-cash. That is used for accounting adjustments, predominantly depreciation. To reiterate previous references to that ring-fenced budget, it cannot be used to support day-to-day spending, nor does it flow to the Scotland reserve. It is therefore not included in our headline provisional outturn results.

For 2023-24, an underspend of £1.1 billion is shown against a budget of £2.5 billion. A large proportion of that budget, circa £900 million, relates to non-cash consequential for student loan impairments, which are simply not required at the same level in Scotland because of our policy of free university tuition.

I emphasise that the figures that I am reporting to the Parliament today remain provisional, as they are subject to change pending completion of 2023-24 year-end audits. Finalised figures will be reported as usual in the annual Scottish Government consolidated accounts and a statement of total outturn later this financial year.

I commend today's figures to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for prior sight of his statement. He is absolutely correct to say that the Scottish Government cannot overspend its budget, and he is also quite correct to say that any underspend does not equate to funds that are lost to the Scottish Government. What the final outturn

statement provides in detail about the choices that are being made by the Scottish Government and the time period in which it is spending the funds that are available to it.

First, will the minister accept the recent Fraser of Allander Institute statistics that show that, excluding the Covid spend, the block grant for the 2023-24 outturn period when measured against current prices was higher than in previous years, which therefore benefited Scottish Government spending? Secondly, does he recognise that there are many in the education sector who might feel very let down by the extent of the underspend in their portfolio when there are so many immediate and pressing issues in our colleges and universities, especially relating to skills and training budgets? Thirdly, on a different but nonetheless related issue, when it comes to spending taxpayers' money, the Scottish Government has—by its own admission, in some ways—got itself into a complete muddle over what European Union funds were available to spend in a particular time period and what had to be handed back. What is the Scottish Government doing to improve the transparency of public spending, as requested by Audit Scotland?

Ivan McKee: I thank Liz Smith for her questions, and I appreciate her recognition of the process with regard to these numbers and the fact that the money is not lost. Indeed, it goes back to the Scotland reserve and will be available to spend this year. A significant portion of the headline number is non-cash, which we cannot translate into spending on day-to-day activities. The reality is that Scotland's budget from the UK has been reduced in real terms. If we look back over the period, we will find that that is indeed the case. That is why we are in the unprecedentedly difficult fiscal position that we find ourselves in.

With regard to spending on education, the Government clearly set out its priorities when it announced its budget. Today, we are going through the outturn numbers that compare against the budget that was laid out by the Government and approved by the Parliament. The Government gives huge priority to our education system, not just for the benefit that it delivers for individuals but for the wider societal and economic benefits that our schools, colleges and universities provide as a consequence of the funding that they receive from the Scottish Government's budget.

I am committed to ensuring that we are as transparent as possible on the funding that we provide and the way in which that funding is managed. That will be the case as I take forward my work as Minister for Public Finance and the work that I am leading on public sector reform.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his

statement. There is wide agreement that the rampant inflation that has been delivered by the UK Tory Government has put great pressure on finances. Unfortunately, the minister appears to believe that an unlimited amount of uncosted Government borrowing is the solution to, rather than the cause of, that chaos. The figures that have been laid before us show that there has been considerable underspend in capital budgets, which is in addition to the hundreds of millions of pounds of EU funds that have been lost due to the Government's incompetence. We need a long-term commitment to growing our economy and our tax base.

When will the delayed medium-term financial strategy be brought to the Parliament? Can the minister guarantee that the strategy will include a plan to close what was a £1.9 billion black hole between what the Government has promised to do and the mess that it made of public finances? Do ministers understand the fiscal framework, given that, yesterday, the governing party published a disastrous tax policy agenda that independent experts have shown to be completely incompetent?

Ivan McKee: Wow—where do I start with that tirade? There are a number of inaccuracies that would take me quite a long time to unpick, but I will pick up on some of the issues. Michael Marra should be aware—I am sure that he is—of the very limited borrowing powers that the Scottish Government has at its disposal, which are only there to allow us to smooth out year-to-year resource spending and give us the very limited ability to move funds when necessary from one financial year to the following one. We do not have the ability to borrow significant amounts of cash on the markets in order to be able to invest in capital projects.

If we look at the reasons why productivity in the UK and, indeed, Scotland, is lower than in comparable nations, it all points back to a lack of capital investment, as well as the constraints that are placed on us and the reductions in capital spending that are a consequence of the UK Government's approach. Those things have significantly held back our ability to grow productivity in Scotland. That said, productivity in Scotland has, over recent years, grown at twice the rate of productivity in the rest of the UK.

I understand that the medium-term financial strategy was not published because of the pre-election purdah period. The cabinet secretary has written to the Finance and Public Administration Committee and will produce that document once we are back in September for FPAC and the Parliament to review.

Michael Marra also mentioned inflation. That is due, in significant part, to the policies of the

current Conservative Government. However, it is important to recognise that, were UK Labour to come to power in a couple of weeks' time, it would, based on its figures, continue with the current UK Government's investment proposals, and would, as a consequence—as independent experts have recognised—have to find £18 billion of cuts. The impact of that on Scotland would be nothing short of disastrous.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Austerity—the political choice of the Conservatives over many years, and the future direction of a potential Labour Government, as confirmed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies—has had an unacceptable impact on Scotland's budget. Can the minister outline what impact cuts have had on Scottish public finances? Can he advise what assessment has been made of the impact of the further cuts, as outlined by the IFS, that are likely to be taken forward by a Labour Government?

Ivan McKee: That question follows on nicely from my previous answer to Michael Marra. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted recently, no matter who wins the election in the UK, unprotected budgets could face cuts of at least £18 billion, and possibly as high as £20 billion, by 2028-29.

We do not know what that means for our budget—as the IFS has also pointed out, there is zero detail from either the Conservatives or the Labour Party about where those cuts might fall. However, decisions by the current UK Government have already cost Scotland up to £1.6 billion in potential consequential, and it is clear that any future UK Government is, unfortunately for Scotland, likely to deliver more of the same austerity.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The underspend in capital that was announced by the minister is £130 million—the highest level in five years, and more than four times the level in the previous year. That is against a backdrop in which vital capital projects, such as the dualling of the A9, are not being progressed. How can the minister have any credibility in complaining about a reduction in the capital budget from the UK Treasury when the Scottish Government's own capital underspend has quadrupled?

Ivan McKee: I expected better from Murdo Fraser, to be honest; I thought that he would have understood how these numbers work. Out of a total capital budget of more than £5 billion—which is not adequate for the investment that we need to make, and which means that we suffer as a consequence of UK cuts—an underspend of just over £100 million amounts to about one week's worth of capital works. That underspend has moved into the current financial year and is being

deployed to support capital programmes in the current budget period.

The reason for that underspend is a slippage of a few days in a capital project, which would not be unexpected in any scenario. I would have thought that Murdo Fraser would have had a more substantial appreciation of the mechanics of how these numbers work and how they relate to one another.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I congratulate the Government on coming within 0.6 per cent of its budget; I think that many organisations and Governments would be amazed if they could come as close as that. The minister mentioned volatility increasing. I wonder whether that is to do with demand-led social security. Can the minister make any further comments about that increase in volatility?

Ivan McKee: Yes—there are some demand-led projects, and part of the reason for the underspend in different portfolios has been identified as being that some services are delivered more efficiently. Some of it has been down to a reduced or lower than anticipated take up of demand-led services.

Nevertheless, the biggest area of volatility, and the hardest part of the fiscal position to manage, is the lack of certainty in the consequential received from the UK Government. As I indicated in my statement, around £0.5 billion of that was firmed up only in the past few weeks of the previous financial year, making it very difficult and challenging to manage the underspend to within those limits. I emphasise that, nevertheless, a good job was done to bring that to within just 0.6 per cent of the total budget position.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations.

On the issue of capital spending and the massive underspend of £130 million, the minister dismissed that as involving a couple of days of work and a late project, but surely that capital spending could have been used. NHS projects are being put on hold, and there is a housing emergency. Surely that £130 million could have been allocated to build urgently needed homes to tackle homelessness and create local jobs. Instead of underspending, can we not just get on with that work now?

Ivan McKee: I am even more disappointed in Sarah Boyack, who I thought had a better grasp of the matter than Murdo Fraser. It is a £5 billion spend over the year. The money appears in the accounts at the point at which the service—in this case, the construction of a capital investment project—is delivered, not when it is committed.

The numbers work out at one week's worth of work. That money is not lost, so it could not magically appear, in addition to the money that we are spending this year, in order to build additional infrastructure or buildings. That money was spent as soon as we started this financial year at the beginning of April and it will continue to be spent through the course of the year. That amount is a very small part of the total £5 billion budget.

Sarah Boyack would better serve her constituents and the people of Scotland by focusing on the significant cuts—in the capital budget from the UK Government—to the amount of money that is available to the Scottish Government to spend, and on what she is doing to ensure that any incoming Labour Government significantly increases the capital spend that is available for Scotland. There is absolutely no indication of that in the numbers that the IFS has published on Labour's plans, should the party come into office in a couple of weeks' time.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Given the delays in the UK Government providing clarity on consequentials, can the minister provide further information regarding the impact that that has had on planning for the Scottish Government? Can he advise what steps the next UK Government could take to avoid the same problems occurring in the future?

Ivan McKee: That is a good point, which I have covered. The lack of clarity and the late confirmation of consequentials across a range of spending areas make it difficult to manage the budget and to land it within the narrow limits of 0.6 per cent that we have, nevertheless, managed to achieve.

To allow for a more robust process, it would be helpful—indeed, it is essential—for any future UK Government to give the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations much earlier sight of the impact of consequentials, so that the planning process can be done earlier in the financial year. Not only would that give us more certainty and allow us to manage the position more accurately but, frankly, chopping and changing the numbers through the year is an inefficient way of managing the operational aspects. Everybody would prefer certainty, because it would allow the public sector to plan better, and people would benefit from the money that we pass on to the third sector and elsewhere. Therefore, that would be a significant ask of any incoming UK Government.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The minister will be aware of the concern that I have previously raised about the fact that the education portfolio bears a disproportionate burden of in-year budget balancing exercises because, unlike a lot of other portfolios, it has areas of spending that

can be reallocated in year. The cumulative impact of that over the past few years has been disproportionate.

Does the minister recognise that, as much as those in-year exercises get us to the end of the financial year, they need to be viewed in that year-on-year balance, and certain portfolios have borne a disproportionate burden? Those decisions would probably not have been made if they had been looked at in the round, over a three or five-year period.

Ivan McKee: A lot of that comes back to the issue of certainty. Self-evidently, if we were in the fortunate position of having multiyear budgets from the UK Government, we would be in a position to manage the situation more effectively.

I have already commented on the importance that the Government places on education, for many valid and important reasons. The in-year position is being managed by the cabinet secretary and her team, to ensure that we land a balanced budget with a very slight underspend. That necessitates us taking steps in year, again because of the lack of certainty as we move through the year and because of our unprecedentedly difficult fiscal position.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is clear that the current UK Government cuts to Scotland's capital budget need to be reversed with urgency. Will the minister advise whether revised fiscal rules from the next UK Government would help borrowing for capital investment?

Ivan McKee: The real-terms reductions in our capital budget imposed by the current UK Government are limiting our ability to invest in the vital infrastructure that sustains our public services. A new incoming Administration at UK level must address that as a priority.

We welcome the limited increases in our capital borrowing limits that form part of the revised fiscal framework, but they are still short of what we believe is necessary to allow us to sustainably invest in our essential infrastructure. The revisiting of the current capital borrowing limits will form part of our immediate asks of any incoming UK Administration.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): The underspend in finance and economy comes on the back of the recent 8.3 per cent real-terms cut to the economy portfolio in the Scottish Government's budget, at the very time when Scotland is in urgent need of policies to stimulate economic growth.

Will the Scottish Government now meet the firm promise that it made during yesterday's debate to place a much greater emphasis on finance and the

economy, and ensure that the money that it has available is spent as quickly as possible on boosting jobs, investment and growth?

Ivan McKee: There is no need to tell me, of all people, about the importance of boosting the economy. That is what the Scottish Government has focused on and the results bear that out. I highlighted the EY inward investment results, which show that Scotland was the best-performing part of the UK outside London for the eighth year in a row. When it comes to attracting inward investment, Scotland outperformed the UK and the European averages for the second year in a row. If we look at the recent growth statistics, in the first quarter of this year, Scotland's economy grew by 0.7 per cent, which is higher than the growth rate across the UK as a whole.

On the issue of underspends, money is allocated to our very effective economic development agencies, which then spend that money to support the initiatives that have been spoken about. However, as I highlighted, the situation at year end is often uncertain because of the lack of clarity on consequential from the UK and when those will arrive. As a consequence, there will always be some transfer of funds from one year to the next but, rest assured, those funds are available and have already been deployed to continue to support Scotland's economic growth ambitions in the current financial year.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In his statement, the minister outlined on-going volatility and uncertainty. Given the UK Tory Government's chronic economic mismanagement, our public services are facing considerable additional pressure as the resources that are available to support them are eroded. That situation is unlikely to improve under Labour. What steps have been taken to provide certainty to our public services in this very challenging context?

Ivan McKee: As Kenny Gibson rightly identifies, our current financial situation is among the most challenging since devolution. Scotland has faced a series of economic shocks, with the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine, soaring inflation and the impact of Brexit. Added to that long list is the UK Government's economic incompetence under the Truss Administration.

Persistent high inflation has put significant pressure on public services, and we have consistently called on the UK Government to provide additional support in response. We have made no secret of the challenge that that presents in sustaining high-quality public services that the people of Scotland deserve. We have had to reprioritise to meet that challenge, which has, unfortunately, created some uncertainty. That is likely to continue into the current financial year as we address the on-going impact of inflation;

however, we will continue to be transparent about those challenges and the actions that we are taking to manage them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): We have seen the Scottish National Party Government cut the housing budget in the middle of a housing emergency, and cut the mental health budget when people, particularly young people, are waiting an age to be seen or treated. It has cut the drug deaths budget when Scotland has the worst drug deaths crisis in the whole of western Europe, with deaths increasing by 10 per cent in the past year alone. As the Scottish Government rolls over that underspend into the next financial year, will it finally commit to funding those priorities properly?

Ivan McKee: As Alex Cole-Hamilton knows, the priorities for budget spend are decided during the budget process, and today we are going through the outturn for last year. As I indicated, the funds that were underspent last year—a small amount compared to the total spend of the Scottish Government—are already rolled over into this fiscal year and are being deployed as a consequence of that.

There are a number of inaccuracies in the statement that Alex Cole-Hamilton makes, but rest assured that the priorities of the Government as outlined by the First Minister—growing the economy, eradicating child poverty and improving public services—are what drive the Government and the fiscal choices that we take to deliver on a budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. Before we move on to the next item of business, there will be a short pause to allow the front-bench members to change position.

Housing Emergency

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Paul McLennan on the Scottish Government's response to Scotland's housing emergency. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:26

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): It is just over a month since we came together to debate the declaration of a housing emergency. Since then, I have continued my extensive engagement with colleagues across the Parliament, our partners in local authorities and our stakeholders. I have met housing conveners to discuss local and common challenges that have contributed to longer turnaround times for empty council properties. I am pleased that the actions that arose from those meetings are now being taken forward.

My meetings with partners and stakeholders have reaffirmed that, although we have the right long-term strategies in place, we must prioritise actions in those plans and work together to deliver them. Our collective priorities must be to increase housing supply and to tackle homelessness. Today, I am setting out our plan of action.

Context is incredibly important, so I will say a few words about the context in which we are operating. The United Kingdom Government's decision not to provide additional capital funding has meant that our block grant for capital is now expected to have reduced in real terms by 8.7 per cent by 2027-28, which will be a cumulative loss of more than £1.3 billion. There has been a 62 per cent overall reduction in financial transactions capital funding this year compared with 2022-23. Those financial constraints have required us to make very difficult choices, and views from colleagues on which capital projects could be paused to free up resources for housing continue to be very welcome. On top of that, the Home Office's streamlined asylum process continues to push people into destitution, and Brexit and wider market conditions have had a devastating impact on the housing sector.

Nevertheless, we have made huge investments to mitigate the harmful effects of UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. We have already spent £1.2 billion over the past 14 years—almost £134 million in this year alone—and we will press the incoming UK Government to recognise the impact of the reduced budget. We will urge it to take action on mortgage availability and lending, to commit to

ensuring that local housing allowance rates meet at least the 30th percentile of local rents, and to abolish policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap.

Housing has a bearing on all four of the First Minister's priorities. That fact is reflected in our proposal for a new national outcome on housing. The plan that I am setting out today is organised under three strategic pillars. First, we need more high-quality permanent homes. Secondly, we need the right homes in the right places. Thirdly, we need everyone to have a permanent home.

I will outline the actions to be taken under each pillar. To get more high-quality permanent homes, we are investing almost £600 million in the affordable housing supply programme in 2024-25. That includes up to £40 million for acquisitions that will be announced this year and a further £40 million next year. That additional £80 million builds on the success of the national acquisition programme, which in 2023-24 delivered almost 1,500 affordable homes, supported by our investment of more than £83 million.

Our open market shared equity scheme will reopen today to new applications. That scheme will deliver hundreds of homes for priority groups.

We must ensure that the resources that we have are deployed to optimal effect. With input from stakeholders, we are concluding our review of the affordable housing supply programme, with a focus on deliverability towards our target of 110,000 homes by 2032. We are working on the development of specific options to attract private investment through the housing investment task force, which had a meeting on Tuesday this week.

We also recognise the crucial role of a well-resourced planning system. The new national planning improvement champion will monitor performance, look at trends, share good practice and identify efficiencies. We received positive feedback on our proposals in the recent "Investing in Planning" consultation, and we will now work at pace to support planning services through an increase in resources and skills development.

We continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure that the rent control measures in the Housing (Scotland) Bill will contribute to our vision of a private rented sector that works for tenants and responsible landlords and is attractive to investors.

In relation to our second pillar—having the right homes in the right places—we will work closely with our local authority partners to ensure that the strategic housing investment plans reflect the full range of housing priorities. I have probably now met between 30 and 32 local authorities, and I discuss those plans regularly with them. The priorities include providing high-quality homes

where they are required for larger families, wheelchair users and older people, as well as high-quality general needs housing.

We are building on the delivery of more than 10,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities between April 2016 and March 2023 through the implementation of our rural and islands housing action plan, which includes substantial mainstream investment for affordable homes, complemented by the rural and islands housing funds and the rural affordable homes for key workers fund.

I now want to talk about providing permanent homes for everyone. We know that the number of children in temporary accommodation is too high—addressing that is a priority for me and the Scottish Government—and that lengthy stays in temporary accommodation are not good for the wellbeing of families. The £80 million of funding that I have mentioned will enable social landlords to secure larger family houses where needed, helping households with children to find a permanent home, which should help to reduce the numbers and the average time spent in temporary accommodation.

We are consulting the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities this week to determine how best to allocate additional support to local authorities with the greatest temporary accommodation challenges. Discussions will continue at pace over the next weeks. We will also support the work of local authorities and registered social landlords to better understand what they need to do to reduce turnaround times for empty homes and voids. We have heard the sector's concerns about delays in reconnecting energy supplies and will back efforts to address that problem.

We remain committed to transforming and modernising the homelessness system. We are widening responsibility for homelessness prevention and investing in rapid rehousing transition plans for the sixth consecutive year.

I will touch on the asks of the housing and homelessness sectors. I really value stakeholder engagement, which will continue as part of the work. I have already said that a collaborative approach to tackling the housing emergency is critical. In my discussions with local authorities, registered social landlords and other partners, we have explored what more needs to be done locally.

I am calling on partners to maximise value for money in affordable housing delivery. I understand that local policies must reflect local need, but I ask that those policies be reviewed to ensure that local authorities can respond to the scale of the challenge that we face. I ask that local authorities provide accurate data when making referrals to

housing associations to improve households' experiences.

I know that positive work is happening. At a recent meeting on turnaround times for empty and void properties, I heard about good practice in parts of Scotland in turning homes around quickly. I want those measures to be deployed across the country.

I ask local authorities that have declared housing emergencies to share the actions that they are taking in response, which will help us to identify where there is consensus on what is needed and to facilitate the sharing of good practice. I have met the City of Edinburgh Council and Fife Council in that regard, and I compliment them for the work that they have done in declaring a housing emergency, because their work allows us to stand beside them and work with them very closely.

We need all parts of Scotland's housing market to work together to tackle the housing crisis. I believe that the private rented sector plays a vital role in addressing housing need. I will meet the Scottish Association of Landlords to discuss what its role will be in an all-tenure approach. We will build on instances of successful joint working already in place. I urge landlords and other partners to continue to work together to explore what more can be done.

I want to talk a bit about the sequence. I recognise that we cannot achieve everything at once and that we must focus on activity that will reduce harm, particularly that which households with children are experiencing. We have decided to reschedule work on a new tenure-neutral housing standard. Rather than seeking to introduce legislation in 2025, we now intend to publish a public consultation on the matter in 2025.

We have heard concerns from local authorities about the impact of introducing homelessness prevention duties at a time when councils are experiencing other pressures. We will therefore seek views on the implementation of the new duties and will consider taking a phased approach to their introduction.

We are analysing responses to our recent consultation on proposals for a heat in buildings bill and a new net zero standard for social housing. I have been hearing about that from stakeholders for a number of months. That analysis will inform our next steps.

The response that I have set out today shows that the Scottish Government is leading a collective response from the front. We have already seen excellent collaboration across the sector and rapid input from expert stakeholders. I particularly welcome the recent letter that was sent

by Shelter and other key stakeholders. I agree with their priority areas and pledge to continue working with those organisations on the points that they make. I hope to meet them shortly to discuss the points that they raised in that letter. Some actions are already under way, and others will be taken forward by the Government. I will be in touch with those organisations and will arrange a meeting very soon.

If we all put our shoulders to the wheel, we will be able to tackle the housing emergency head on. I look forward to working with stakeholders and members from across the chamber as we do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak button if they have not already done so.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank the minister for an advance copy of his statement. A month ago, the Scottish Government declared a housing emergency, but what we have heard today does not sound or feel like a response to an emergency. We need to see more from the Government, and the fact that the minister mentioned children only twice in his statement tells us a lot. Every day, 45 children become homeless in Scotland. Under this Scottish National Party Government, 9,860 children are living in temporary accommodation and some have been in such accommodation for years. That is an increase of 138 per cent over the past decade, while the SNP and the Greens have been in power.

The minister mentioned the letter that has been sent to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I agree with the key ask in that letter about children living in temporary accommodation, which is an issue that I have consistently raised in this chamber during this session of Parliament. In the time remaining in this session, we have the opportunity to make a difference in line with the First Minister's policy of eradicating child poverty, but we need a single-minded focus on reducing the harm that children living in temporary accommodation experience. How many children does the minister expect will be living in temporary accommodation in Scotland by the end of this parliamentary session?

Paul McLennan: I will touch on a number of points in response to that. I said in my statement that the issue of children in temporary accommodation is a top priority for me. As I have mentioned, just last night, I told Shelter that that will be the top priority as we move forward. I also said that I will meet the stakeholders who wrote the letter. I will be happy to meet them individually or as a group; I already meet them regularly.

I have spoken about some of the key things. There is an all-agency approach, and we are working with stakeholders, but we also need collaboration from an incoming United Kingdom Labour Government. In answer to previous questions, I have spoken about the homelessness monitor report from Heriot-Watt University and Crisis, which said that the two biggest issues that are causing the increase in homelessness are the level of local housing allowance and the level of universal credit. As I said in my statement, any incoming Government must look at those two priority issues.

As Mr Briggs knows, I meet the City of Edinburgh Council and other local authorities to focus on that particular point. As I said, we will work particularly closely on that with COSLA, the other groups that are mentioned in the letter and local authorities.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): We have just heard that there is a £130 million underspend on capital spending, but the Government has slashed the housing budget. We have a housing bill that will not build a single house, while 45 children are becoming homeless every day. That situation will keep happening, because the Government is not doing anything different, except for cutting the housing budget.

I am not entirely sure why we have had a statement today. No one in this chamber is an expert in the field, but there is a document that has been produced by experts. The Association of Local Authority Housing Officers, the Chartered Institute of Housing, Homes for Scotland, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and Shelter have all contributed to a comprehensive set of recommendations to address and remedy the housing emergency in Scotland. I simply ask the minister: which of those recommendations will the Government take forward and which will it not take forward?

Paul McLennan: There are a number of points to make. I do not know whether Mr Griffin was in the chamber earlier when Ivan McKee mentioned in his statement that that £130 million will be carried forward. The total budget was within 0.6 per cent of its target. Having been a councillor for 15 years, I know that, if any council budget came within that level, it would be seen as pretty successful. That money—which is across all parts of the Scottish Government budget, not just across housing—has been carried forward.

There are a number of things to say on the issue. I regularly meet ALACHO, CIH, Homes for Scotland, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, SFHA and Shelter. We are already working on some of the actions that are in the document. I have offered to meet those organisations to discuss

those specific points, but, as I have said, we are already working on many of the actions that they have asked for.

Mr Griffin knows that we meet regularly, and I am happy to discuss updates on those points with him regularly, but we are already working on most of the actions. As I said in my statement, we agree with the actions that the organisations have highlighted. I will meet them very shortly and will take forward those points.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As many members will know, the issue of homelessness is very close to my heart. I am grateful to the minister for agreeing to meet me shortly to discuss these issues. However, will he go into more detail now on how policy will be readjusted in order for us to successfully tackle homelessness in Scotland?

Paul McLennan: I have a number of points to make. We have talked about the action plan that the six stakeholders have put together, and I will meet them fairly shortly to discuss that. I have also mentioned acquisitions, with £40 million this year and £40 million next year to tackle that.

In addition, I have mentioned the prioritisation of children in temporary accommodation, and we have already started discussions on that. I met the special interest group and COSLA on Tuesday to discuss that point. COSLA is discussing how it will take that forward itself, and we will continue to discuss that. An additional £2 million in the 2023-24 budget is targeted at the local authorities that are most in need. Miles Briggs will know about the work on that in Edinburgh, for example. The specific local housing emergency action plans are important, because they allow me to focus on what is being done locally and to consider where we can help them.

A number of actions are under way, and we will take forward the points that have been raised in the action plan, too.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Before I ask my question, I welcome Colin McInnes from Homeless Project Scotland, who is in the Scottish Parliament today. I thank him for all the work that is done by Homeless Project Scotland to help people in need.

Depopulation in rural areas is linked to a lack of affordable housing. However, in response to one of my written questions, the minister admitted that only 21 homes were completed in rural and island communities in the past year through the Scottish Government's rural and islands housing funds. What action is the Government taking to speed up the development of homes for rural and island communities?

Paul McLennan: I will note a number of things for context. As I mentioned in my statement, we have delivered—this is an important element—more than 10,000 homes over a period to tackle that issue. I went to a rural housing conference a number of months ago to talk about some of those issues. Working with local authorities and community housing development trusts is really important.

We are looking at opportunities in the freeport in the Highlands, and we have been working closely with local authorities, the investment community and the enterprise agencies on the potential for that. This week, a newspaper reported that an estimated 24,000 homes will be needed there; so, as I have said, we are working closely with those bodies.

We are also working closely with Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks to talk about renewables opportunities up and down the coast, many of which are in rural areas. There are opportunities to work with SSEN in that regard.

We have undertaken and will continue to undertake a lot of work. The challenge that is faced is the additional cost due to being in rural areas, so we are working on how we can minimise the cost impact. I am happy to discuss the issue further with Pam Gosal.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The SNP Government has led house building in the UK, completing 40 per cent more affordable and social homes per head of population than in England and 70 per cent more than in Labour-run Wales. However, with the UK Tory Government's cut of capital funding of £1,300 million over three years, maintaining our UK-leading affordable housing provision will be increasingly difficult. Does the minister expect any step change in available funding from an incoming UK Government? Will he remind the chamber how many council houses the previous Labour Administration built in Scotland over four years?

Paul McLennan: I thank Kenneth Gibson for his question, which highlighted the important context. We are talking here about the Institute for Fiscal Studies projections that £18 billion of fiscal cuts will be required. The IFS has stated that neither the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party is facing up to that incredibly important issue.

Rachel Reeves, who is likely to be the next Chancellor of the Exchequer, has said that Labour will not change the current fiscal rules. I know from speaking to my colleagues in the Welsh Government that they have similar asks in that regard, including for increases in local housing allowance and universal credit.

To come back to Mr Gibson's question about the number of council houses that were built by

the most recent Labour Administration in Scotland, I will need to check this, but I think that the figure was six.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): This morning, a coalition of housing organisations that includes the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Chartered Institute of Housing and Homes for Scotland put out a statement in which it called on the Scottish Government to take action to cut the number of children in temporary accommodation by 25 per cent before the end of this parliamentary session.

There are 2,910 children in Edinburgh who are stuck in temporary accommodation, and they stay in temporary accommodation for an average of 471 days—the longest period in the country. Will the minister commit to reducing those figures? What concrete action will be taken to get children out of temporary accommodation?

Paul McLennan: I regularly meet the organisations that Foysoyl Choudhury mentioned—for example, last night, I spoke to Shelter about the organisations' statement. I indicated to Shelter that, as I said earlier, our focus will be on reducing the number of children in temporary accommodation. That is the main priority for me.

One of the key issues in relation to Edinburgh is how we can maximise the opportunities to tackle the use of temporary accommodation. At one stage, Edinburgh had more than 1,500 void properties. We have worked closely with City of Edinburgh Council, whose local housing emergency action plan was much appreciated. We are working closely with it to tackle the number of voids. Empty homes are another issue on which we are working very closely with City of Edinburgh Council. It has just taken on a second empty homes officer.

There are things that we can do within the current set-up to maximise the opportunities in that area. As I said, we meet City of Edinburgh Council on a regular basis, and I would be happy to meet Mr Choudhury at any time to discuss the specific Edinburgh issues that he raised.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I fully appreciate that the Scottish Government's capital budget has been cut by around 9 per cent, and I note that, this financial year, the Scottish Government has allocated around £600 million of its resources to increasing the provision of affordable housing, but will the minister provide an update on what specific actions the Scottish Government is engaged in to address Edinburgh's very serious housing emergency, especially given the acute impact that significant population growth is having on the availability of social housing in my constituency

and the demand that exists for what is available across the city?

Paul McLennan: Building on the answer that I gave to Mr Choudhury, I regularly meet the City of Edinburgh Council to discuss where it is with its housing emergency action plan. We have talked about void properties, empty homes and maximising the grant funding that it is getting this year. We are also looking at how we might minimise the number of children in temporary accommodation, given the impact that that has.

A number of other issues are important. I regularly meet the Cities Alliance, which includes the City of Edinburgh Council, to see how we can attract investment into the Scottish cities. We work closely with the alliance. I have also requested a meeting with the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region, which includes the City of Edinburgh Council. There are probably about seven or eight strategic sites the development of which would provide a large amount of social housing and affordable housing in the next number of years. We are working very closely with the city region to look at opportunities for infrastructure investment that might bring investment into the area.

Another issue is how we use the private rented sector, which, again, I have spoken to the City of Edinburgh Council about. We have also discussed the purpose-built student accommodation sector and the need to understand how we can use that.

There are a number of areas in which we can look at what we are doing at the moment, but I continue to look to the future and to consider what support we can provide.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Currently, almost 100,000 residential homes across Scotland stand empty. Those homes must be rapidly brought back into use. Some councils are leading the way on that, and the minister talked about the work that is under way to share good practice, but it is clear that a lack of funding is holding many of them back.

Does the minister agree that the provision of a match fund to enable local authorities to scale up existing empty homes teams could make a significant difference to that total and that it could bring at least 3,000 homes a year back into use? Will he commit to introducing such a fund as soon as he can?

Paul McLennan: I appreciate the point that Maggie Chapman makes, which is incredibly important. We have talked about the important issue of void properties, which can be tackled in different ways. One of the issues relates to utilities and the shortage of workmen. We are working very closely with councils on that—I met housing conveners to discuss that point.

The empty homes partnership is funded by the Scottish Government and, with £3.2 million, it has developed 9,000 empty homes. As the member knows, some of the issues with empty homes are more complex—for example, they can involve people in care or people overseas. That point has been raised by a number of the groups that have produced the action plan. As I said, we would be happy to engage on that and see what we can do.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It is disappointing to see just how little is in the minister's statement on the action that the Government plans to take to tackle the housing crisis that the Parliament rightly declared. There is also very little acknowledgement that the Government's own actions in slashing the housing budget by a third have contributed to the problems that now exist in the sector.

A shortage of adequate housing can mean all the difference in that health and care workers are unable to live in the communities that need them in order to provide the services that are desperately needed. Will the Government look at Liberal Democrat proposals to build attractive, sustainable housing that is reserved for the key workers whom our communities need?

Paul McLennan: Again, I have a couple of points to make. As Alex Cole-Hamilton may know, I regularly meet Willie Rennie and he has not mentioned that particular issue, but I am happy to meet Alex Cole-Hamilton or Willie Rennie on that point.

In the report from Shelter Scotland and others, there are around 16 actions. We were already working on many of those and discussing them with stakeholders. As I said, a collaborative approach is needed through the stakeholders, the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local councils working together.

I am happy to discuss Mr Cole-Hamilton's point with him or with Mr Rennie at any stage.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Too many families are on waiting lists for affordable housing. The most difficult housing casework that I deal with involves individuals and families who require adapted properties in order to live safe, full lives.

The motion that the Parliament passed noted the role that all levels of government must play in tackling Scotland's housing emergency and the fact that the current situation follows a decade of austerity across the UK—austerity that, to be frank, the Labour Party manifesto seems reluctant or unwilling to reverse. Will the minister elaborate on the steps that must be taken by the next UK Government to remedy the current difficulties and help us to build what we need to ensure that the

housing needs of all Scotland's citizens are met in full?

Paul McLennan: I will come in a second to the point about the UK Government asks. Ruth Maguire mentioned the need for adapted properties, which is an incredibly important point. One issue is local authorities understanding the need for adapted properties and being proactive rather than reactive. The Scottish Government has reviewed the issues around that and we are working on what we can do to give support, but there is a role for local authorities in that.

I go back to the homelessness monitor, which came through Heriot-Watt University. The two key things that it talked about were restoring LHA to the rate that it should be at and universal credit. That is an independent analysis.

There has been mention of reversing the capital budget cut. The financial transactions part of that was a 62 per cent cut in one year. That did not affect housing, but it impacted health spending and the ability of the Scottish National Investment Bank to operate to its maximum capabilities.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cross-party group on housing recently met five of the councils that have declared a housing emergency. We wrote to the minister with some ideas of things that he could do. Our number 1 ask was that he produce a plan to deal with it. He has not done that today. One of the big asks was that he reverse the 26 per cent cut to the affordable housing supply programme. He has not done that. *[Interruption.]* I am being heckled by the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice. The minister has reannounced an extra £80 million, which was first announced in April. That does not close the gap. Does he not accept that that disastrous £200 million cut is having a real impact on addressing homelessness?

Paul McLennan: I will try to remain calm while I answer that question. We are talking about the capital budget cut, which Graham Simpson knows about. We met during the week and discussed it. I have mentioned it—it was a cut of around £1.3 billion, and the biggest impact was on financial transactions. There was a 62 per cent cut in one year—by your Government. Again, your Government had that political choice to make on that particular point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair.

Paul McLennan: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

That is the important context for what we are trying to do. The £40 million was not a reannouncement: I spoke about there being £40 million this year and £40 million next year. The £40 million that I discussed in the context of the

statement was for working closely with COSLA to tackle the specific issue of homelessness among children.

In reference to the five local authorities, I commended what Edinburgh and Fife, which are Labour-controlled authorities, have done. I will work with any local authority that proposes a detailed action plan on homelessness. I am asking every local authority to do that so that we can work closely with them. We are already working on a number of emergency housing action plans, and we will continue to do so. However, every local authority needs to work with us and provide detail to support such plans.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): There continues to be much discussion of disallowing any rent rises between tenancies. The industry view is that that could limit investment in properties, as any spend would be, in effect, a sunk cost. What assessment has the minister made of that possibility and of its potential impact on meeting the green housing objectives?

Paul McLennan: I would like to pick up on a number of Michelle Thomson's points, especially about the green housing element and, in particular, on the retrofitting aspect. I was a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee when it considered that issue, at which point the estimated cost was said to be £33 billion. That was a couple of years ago, so it will probably be higher now. The green heat finance task force is also considering the issue just now.

When I first came into post, one of my priorities was to maximise opportunities for investment in social housing as well as build-to-rent properties at mid-market rent. Only yesterday, I met representatives of Scottish Land & Estates to discuss the work that it is doing to build houses, which could total 1,500 to 2,000 houses in some areas. Since I took responsibility for the Housing (Scotland) Bill, I have met stakeholders to discuss aspects of that, and we are currently reviewing the outcomes. Of course, we will need to get the balance right between protecting our most vulnerable people from rent rises and having the ability to bring investment into Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement on Scotland's housing emergency. Before we move on to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench speakers to change places.

Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-13664, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3.

As members will be aware, the Presiding Officer is required under standing orders to decide whether, in her view, any provision of the bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In the Presiding Officer's view, no provision of the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill relates to a protected subject matter. Therefore, the bill does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

15:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As we have discussed previously, the bill seeks to remove the definition of "woman" from section 2 of the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. That follows decisions made by the inner house of the Court of Session, which were effective from 19 April 2022. The court decided that the section 2 definition was outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, was not law and accordingly had no legal effect. At that time, our counsel told the court that we would remove the redundant definition from the 2018 act. If passed, the bill that is before members will provide clarity by removing the redundant definition from the statute book to ensure that no one is misled. Removing that definition will eliminate the possibility of any confusion for readers of the 2018 act who are unaware of the court's decisions in 2022.

I appreciate that introducing such a small bill is unusual. As members will know, the Scottish Government considered other planned legislation and did not find a suitable vehicle that could implement this bill's aim. Further, as members will also know, the necessary change could not be made through secondary legislation.

I was pleased to read the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's stage 1 report on the bill, which stated that the committee was

"satisfied that this Bill provides a technical fix, in order to tidy up the statute book"

and that it was

“content to recommend that Parliament agrees the general principles of the Bill.”

The committee noted, too, that the majority of respondents to the call for views also agreed with the general principles of the bill.

Similarly, at stage 2, the committee was content that the bill should proceed, and I would like to thank the committee for its work on the bill. I note that there have been no amendments to the bill at any stage, which indicates to me that members understand that this is a small technical fix to clear up the statute book. The bill does not change the policy intention of the 2018 act—we still need the boards of our public bodies to better reflect the population of Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I should have invited members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible. Meghan Gallacher has already done it, so I will reward her by calling her for around six minutes.

16:00

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary is absolutely spot on. The bill is a short bill, but its contents can be seen as frustrating, because we are spending parliamentary time today fixing yet another mess that was created by the Scottish Government in the previous parliamentary session. The previous Scottish National Party Government changed the definition of a woman when it passed the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. The definition that was contained in the 2018 act wrongly confused two distinct protected characteristics in a separate law—those of a biological woman and those of people who are transgender. The nature of protected characteristics is also a reserved matter, so the definition of a woman in the 2018 act impinged on matters that were not devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Changing the definitions of a protected characteristic is, of course, not permitted in law, and it led to the conclusion that the respected act was outside the Scottish Parliament’s legislative competence.

Had it not been for women’s groups challenging the 2018 act, the amending bill would not be before us today. I am pleased that we have fierce, resilient and brave women right across Scotland who will not tolerate their rights being eroded. They have challenged this Government over its policies and decision making and continue to be

unapologetically vocal in their fight to protect women and girls.

It was For Women Scotland that brought the judicial review on the Scottish Government’s new definition of a woman, and the inner house of the Court of Session ruled on 18 February 2022 that the 2018 act was outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, as it amended the definition of protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010.

As the 2018 act could not be amended quickly, the court issued an order that declared that the definition should be formally removed from the 2018 act and the statutory guidance. That means that the act has been operating under the Equality Act 2010 definition of a woman since 19 April 2022.

I believe that the outcome that was determined by the court shows that biological sex matters. The bill that we are discussing today removes the unlawful definition from the 2018 act, and that is welcome.

It is, of course, a step in the right direction, but it is not one that the SNP Government took on its own. The SNP is continuously tying itself in knots when it comes to its understanding of protected characteristics. Through the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, it tried to create a hierarchy of protected characteristics, pitting groups against one another. We are still feeling the aftermath of the deep division that was sown by the Scottish Government over issues such as self-identification. Women are witnessing their hard-won rights being diluted and feeling that their legislative protections are worth less than those of other vulnerable groups. The Government has not supported them, has not engaged with them and has dismissed their concerns as being not valid. That is not how we create equality. It is a sad reflection that women feel the need to challenge the Government to ensure that their rights are upheld. Lessons need to be learned from that.

That brings me on to the impact of the never-ending legal challenges. Hundreds of thousands of pounds have already been squandered by the SNP on gender-related matters. Whether it be judicial reviews or the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, we are seeing a pattern. In my view, it needs to stop. It creates more division, and I am sure that we agree that taxpayers’ money could be better spent elsewhere.

Here are my asks of the Scottish Government today. Accept the rulings and stop meddling in matters that are reserved. Do not stray into areas that make legislation unlawful. Please listen to women’s groups, because all that they want is for their rights to be protected and respected. There is nothing controversial in any of that.

Given that we are here today because of the hard work and efforts of For Women Scotland, I will end my contribution by thanking them for their hard work, their tenacity and their expertise. They are the women who would not wheesht. For Women Scotland turned six years old today. I congratulate it on its campaigning success so far. The Scottish Conservatives will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with it on these issues.

I finish by asking For Women Scotland directly to keep powering on to protect the rights of women and girls in Scotland.

16:05

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I do not intend to speak for too long, but I want to offer some remarks.

In the stage 1 proceedings on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, I commented that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, which I am a member of, had produced the smallest stage 1 report that I had ever seen in the Parliament and had reached the conclusion that the bill should proceed in order to tidy up the statute book. At stage 2, there were no amendments for the committee to consider, and this afternoon, in a rare occurrence, we have no amendments to the bill to consider at stage 3. It is clear that there is consensus on passing the bill and, therefore, taking the action that is required to ensure that the statute book reflects the legal judgment that was handed down in the Court of Session.

There are a number of things that we should take time to reflect on as we bring our consideration of the bill to its conclusion. As has already been outlined, we are here because of a legal judgment on the original act. I have sometimes felt of late that that has become a more common situation. We could look at some of the challenges around bringing the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to its conclusion and around other issues. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament collectively need to be better at ensuring that legislation does not end up in the courts and that we produce good legislation at every stage. We need to ensure that the scrutiny of legislation is well considered and well done so that we do not end up with a legal challenge.

It is worth reiterating at this stage in the proceedings the importance of the original legislation. I made some comments on that in my contribution at stage 1. Scottish Labour fully supported the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. I was not a member

of the Scottish Parliament when the 2018 act was passed. However, although we are now seeking to rectify the statute book, I think that everybody recognises that the 2018 act is an important step on the journey to ensuring better gender parity and increasing the representation of women in public life.

We know that the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill will not change anything that is happening on the ground, because the definition in the 2018 act has been defunct since Lady Dorrian’s initial judgment and the introduction of the Scottish Government’s revised guidance, which was subsequently affirmed by the court. Given that the act has been in effect with revised guidance since the judgments, it would be good to hear from the Government what assessment it is making of the impact of the original act and whether that is living up to its policy intent. We all want to see the original act meeting the policy intent of creating greater parity.

In speaking to colleagues this morning, I was reflecting that we are still falling short on that in many areas in public life. Just because there is legislation for public boards, that does not mean that we always get it right in every sphere of life to ensure gender balance. Indeed, changes today to the Parliament’s Public Audit Committee mean that that committee now has five male members and three male substitute members. It is incumbent on all parties that are represented in the Parliamentary Bureau to reflect on how we show leadership in the chamber and in the Parliament as a whole, and on how to have greater parity in decisions on Parliament committees, and to lead by example. I am sure that the business managers will reflect on that, as I am sure that you will, too, Presiding Officer.

I do not intend to detain members for much longer with my opening speech, and I do not intend to rehearse the old debates to any large degree. It is our job as responsible legislators to consider the court’s judgments, to respect them and to ensure that we have a tidy statute book to prevent any future confusion.

Given the brevity of the bill, I will leave my remarks there.

16:09

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank everyone who has contributed to the bill reaching stage 3 today, including my fellow committee members, Scottish Parliament information centre researchers, Scottish Government officials, the bill team and civil society organisations.

Sadly, there has been a certain amount of misunderstanding about what the bill does and why it has been introduced. As we have heard, all that the bill does is to amend the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 by removing a three-line definition of the word “woman” in section 2 of the act—no more.

The passing of the bill is not a victory for anyone or any ideological position. The amendment of the legislation follows decisions by the Court of Session—decisions that specifically did not say that the definition was wrong. All that the court said was that it was outside the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, on the ground that protected characteristics are a matter reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament in Westminster.

We might very well think that it is a pity that the devolution settlement is so inconsistent as to place human rights within our competence and equalities outwith it. We might also think it more than a pity that the rights and wellbeing of our transgender friends, colleagues, neighbours and relatives, which have been so much better protected here, must be subject to the toxic scapegoating of Westminster and media discourse. Yet again, it seems that independence will be the only way to secure a truly fair and inclusive Scotland.

However, the bill is not about those issues, important though they are. It is simply, as the committee report notes, “a technical fix”. It was not strictly essential, for the definition has had no legal effect since April 2022, as Paul O’Kane has outlined, but the bill has been introduced in order to bring the formal statute book up to date, to provide clarity and to prevent any potential confusion. The use of a stand-alone bill to make the amendment might seem disproportionate, but we are assured that there were no powers in the 2018 act or any other act that would allow the change to be made by way of regulations.

I and my Scottish Green colleagues will therefore be voting in favour of the bill at decision time, as a matter of legislative clarification. We stand, as always, in solidarity with transgender and non-binary people across Scotland and beyond, and we continue to strive for a future that we can all be proud to share.

16:12

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Predictably, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice continues to downplay the importance of today’s amendment bill. However, it is a crucial step to align the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 with the Court of Session ruling that the Scottish Government’s

redefinition of “woman” was outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and, therefore, not law.

The 2018 act was the Scottish Government’s misguided attempt to redefine “woman” ahead of self-identification becoming law in Scotland. Of course, self-ID is not law in Scotland. So, what has the Government actually done to clarify that self-identifying as a woman is not enough to be eligible for a woman’s place on a public board? Are we now reliant on members of small, self-funded campaigns and policy groups such as For Women Scotland and Murray Blackburn Mackenzie, some of whom are with us in the public gallery today, to be the Parliament’s unofficial revising chamber? If so, would it not be more prudent for the public purse for the Scottish Government to listen to them during the legislative process, rather than responding to them in court in response to their judicial reviews?

I have repeatedly called for competence in Government to raise the bar in the Parliament to rebuild that fragile public trust, but we can only do that when lessons are learned and acted on. The unlawful definition of “woman” was not in the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Bill when it was introduced to the Parliament; it was added later, at stage 2, following the publication of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s stage 1 report. It is very concerning that such a core parliamentary committee did not understand the Equality Act 2010.

As a Parliament, we can and we should learn and improve our committee stage, by listening widely to those who want to contribute. I am very disappointed that the Government is continuing to show contempt for half of the population of Scotland by not admitting that it has made that mistake—and then not apologising for it. If the Government is still struggling, I will clear it up for ministers now: a woman is, and always has been, an adult human female.

16:14

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As has been mentioned by a number of members in the chamber, I clarify again that the bill makes a small technical fix to clear up the statute book in order to remove the redundant definition of a woman from the 2018 act. That is due to the court’s decision about the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.

There has been a slight rewriting of history about what happened when the initial bill was going through the Parliament. For the record, I point to the fact that the 2018 act was passed by a large majority in the Scottish Parliament; indeed,

all the votes against the bill came from the Conservatives. I note that the definition of a woman was added to the bill that became the 2018 act by a stage 2 amendment that was not lodged by the Scottish Government. The amendment was agreed to unanimously by Equalities and Human Rights Committee members, including Conservative members. Notwithstanding that, the Conservatives voted against passing the bill.

Paul O’Kane raised an important point when he mentioned the need for the Scottish Government and those who lodge non-Scottish Government amendments to be live to the challenge of where legislative competence sits, because that is a complex issue. We must be particularly thoughtful about that given that the Government remains committed to the proposed human rights bill, which will again present challenges of legislative competence as we seek to push the boundaries as far as we can in order to protect rights in Scotland. That is an important aspect that we must continue to look at.

In all sincerity, I hope that the Scottish Government can work with an incoming Labour Government, should that party be successful in the election, on what we can do to ensure that the Government and the Parliament, as they make decisions about important aspects to do with rights, can work together to test where the boundaries of legislative competence lie. I also hope that, if changes need to be made to allow us to further improve rights—whether that be for children, disabled adults and children, or other groups—we can do that together. I look forward to a change of approach.

Paul O’Kane was right to mention the important aspect of the original bill’s policy intent. We are seeing progress, but I think that he would agree that it is not enough and that it is not being made quickly enough. We need to work together. He gave an example of what is happening in the Parliament, and there are other examples across society, in the public and private sectors, of where more needs to be done.

I urge members to allow the bill to pass so that the technical fix can be made and so that we can ensure that the legislation that we have in the statute book is clear and without the potential for misunderstanding.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the stage 3 debate on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion without Notice

16:18

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

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.18 pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:18

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-13664, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass the bill at stage 3, the question must be decided by division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:19

Meeting suspended.

16:21

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on motion S6M-13664, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville. Members should cast their votes now.

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)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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 motion S6M-13664, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, is: For 108, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Benefits Uptake

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12301, in the name of Evelyn Tweed, on increasing benefits uptake in the current economic climate. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that it is important that people are accessing all the benefits that they are entitled to, especially in the current economic climate; notes reports from 2023 that £19 billion of benefits went unclaimed across the UK; understands that some benefits are especially undersubscribed; further understands that 25% of those eligible for the Young Carer Grant do not currently claim it, as well as 39% of those eligible for Funeral Support Payment; notes the encouragement for the people of Scotland, including those in the Stirling constituency, to ensure that they are receiving all the support that they are eligible for; highlights what it sees as the useful services available, such as Citizens Advice Scotland, Age UK, and various online calculators to help individuals identify benefits that they may be missing out on; understands that Advice Direct Scotland's benefits calculator allows people to check their entitlement to both devolved and reserved benefits, and that it has been used by 56,000 people to identify over £43 million of unclaimed money; believes that a level of stigma is still associated with accessing some benefits; notes the belief that, although great work is underway, more work is required in this area, and recognises the stakeholders that are working to widen access to and reduce the stigma associated with benefits.

16:25

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I am pleased to lead the members' business debate today. As we all know, the current economic climate is extremely challenging, with years of austerity in Westminster, the cost of living crisis and Brexit. Prices are rising, wages are not going as far as they used to and many people are forced to choose between heating and eating.

In 2023-24, food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Scotland provided 86,000 emergency food parcels for children, which represents a 20 per cent increase since 2018-19. Six in 10—or 60 per cent—of all food parcels that were provided in 2023-24 were for families with children. No one should have to make those choices.

The United Kingdom welfare state was designed as a safety net, and many people are in need of it now but, last year, £19 billion of benefits went unclaimed across the UK, and I am sorry to say that that sum has now increased to £22.7 billion. That enormous sum could make a real difference to the lives of many people.

We can be in no doubt that the benefits that this Government administers in Scotland can be transformational, including the Scottish child

payment, which is set to keep 60,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25. However, we must ensure that people are claiming what they are eligible for.

The latest statistics on benefits take-up in Scotland from November 2023 show that barriers persist for some benefits. For example, 25 per cent of those who are eligible for the young carer grant do not currently claim it, while 39 per cent of those who are eligible for the funeral support payment do not claim it either. The job start payment, which is a one-off payment of more than £300 for young people who are starting work, has a take-up rate of only 15 per cent. Many eligible people are not applying, and I welcome the steps that the Government has taken to increase take-up, including extending the application window.

Through the winter, I hosted two cost of living round tables in my constituency with local organisations, including Social Security Scotland, Startup Stirling, Citizens Advice Scotland and local housing associations. The aim was to hear about the challenges that face them and their service users, and stigma was mentioned time and again. The Poverty Alliance recommends that the Government develops training on stigma, poverty and inequality. There are also huge misconceptions about the scale of benefit fraud, which leads to stigma from the general public. Any awareness measures need to tackle that, too.

We in the Parliament also have a role to play. The Poverty Alliance points out that stigma is, in part,

“fuelled by language and messages of politicians and the media”.

What we say and how we say it really matters.

The Department for Work and Pensions system is punitive, and research has found that sanctions push people into poverty. Social Security Scotland is designed to put dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of what it does. The Poverty Alliance citizens panel agreed that dealing with Social Security Scotland was much less stigmatising than dealing with the DWP.

Although Social Security Scotland has been working hard to build relationships, I heard that some local organisations were still not sure about its role. Further to my round table, Social Security Scotland has made good connections locally. For example, staff now visit minister Barry Hughes’s church in Raploch at the same time as the food bank, the citizens advice bureau and many other services. That approach works extremely well.

The impact of bringing services to places and events where attendance is high and people are comfortable is huge. The Poverty Alliance found that having positive support from a trusted

professional to encourage and help with applications was a tipping point towards applying for benefits.

We also need to consider the rise of in-work poverty. Around 60 per cent of children living in poverty in Scotland live in a household in which at least one adult works. I encourage all my colleagues to engage with local organisations and get them in a room together. Members will learn so much, and those connections can lead to amazing partnerships.

I seek assurances from the minister that the Government will seek to alleviate the barriers to take-up. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that £78 billion of public spending in the UK is linked to dealing with poverty and its consequences. Poverty wastes potential and deprives us of the talents and skills of many people.

We are living in tough times, and we need to ensure that everyone is aware of the help that is out there for them and feels able to accept it.

16:32

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Evelyn Tweed on securing the debate. I will restrict my comments to the percentage of eligible pensioners who do not claim pension credit. This is not the first, nor probably the last, speech that I will make on the topic.

Earlier this year, pensioners received notification from the DWP of the pension that they would be paid from April, together with—to be fair—a leaflet advising of pension credit. However, members might not be aware that 40 per cent of pensioners who are entitled to pension credit do not claim it. That figure has remained unchanged for decades.

What is pension credit? It is a UK benefit and you can check online whether you qualify, or you can contact your local citizens advice bureau or my office or use Age UK’s website, which has a handy calculator to check whether you are eligible. It is discreet, and there should never be reluctance to claim that right.

Broadly speaking, when you apply for pension credit, your income is calculated. If you have a partner, both incomes are calculated together. If you qualify, your weekly income is topped up to £218.15 if you are single; if you have a partner, your joint weekly income is topped up to £332.95. Even if your income is higher, you might still be eligible for pension credit if you have a disability, care for someone, have savings or have housing costs.

Apart from that direct income boost, if you get pension credit, you can also get other help known as passported benefits, such as housing benefit if you rent the property that you live in, a cost of living payment, support for mortgage interest if you own the property that you live in, a free TV licence if you are aged 75 or over, and help to pay for national health service dental treatment, glasses and transport costs for hospital appointments. If you get a certain type of pension credit, you can get help with your heating costs through the warm home discount scheme, and you can even get a discount on using the Royal Mail redirection service if you are moving house. A whole range of passported benefits follow if you claim your pension credit, so it is worth seeing whether you are entitled to it. I stress that it is an entitlement, not a handout.

Here are some statistics that are relevant to Midlothian and the Borders. The estimated unclaimed pension credit per annum in Midlothian is £2.5 million, and in the Borders it is £3.66 million. The expected uptake in Midlothian, after campaigns, is only 31 per cent, while in the Borders it is 44 per cent. The lost passported benefits in Midlothian are worth £20,000-plus and those in the Borders are worth £30,000. The number of households that are losing out is estimated to be 92 in Midlothian and 133 in the Borders. Those are entitlements that could affect those 92 and 133 households, where individuals are scraping by when they need not, and should not, be doing so.

I have raised the issue of raising awareness with the UK Government, and I have asked Scottish Borders Council to publicise pension credit in the transport exchange in Galashiels. I will extend my campaign to increase awareness through my entire constituency. In these tough times of austerity and inflation, every claim counts. Please chase it up if you think that you might be entitled to pension credit, even if you are not sure. As I have said, my office would be pleased to help, and all contacts with us are confidential. To those 92 and 133 or so households in Midlothian and the Borders, I say: please claim. It can make all the difference, so that you do not have to choose between heating or eating.

16:37

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank Evelyn Tweed for securing this important debate. I am always pleased to have the opportunity to talk about social security in Scotland.

The truth that the motion uncovers is that lifting people out of poverty is not just about pledging money; it is equally important that the support gets to those who need it most. We can promise all the

money in the world but, if people in need are not accessing it, what is the point?

Here in Scotland, we need to do more. As Evelyn Tweed pointed out, one in four eligible people are not claiming the young carers grant and 39 per cent of eligible people are not claiming funeral support payments. Both of those benefits are administered by Social Security Scotland. Those numbers represent real people who are not getting what they are entitled to.

It is clear that more needs to be done and, to my mind, it is clear that the most effective way to improve uptake is to remove the biggest barrier, which is the poor distribution of benefits. After eight years of devolved social security, we are still seeing processing times that are sky high. We are seeing websites crash, long forms that people find difficult to fill in and applicants being unable to go through Social Security Scotland for help. The poor experience of people when they interact with the agency puts them off doing so again in the future. That leads to many people claiming some but not all of the benefits that they are entitled to. If we can ensure a more positive user experience, we can increase the likelihood of higher uptake.

As members will know, the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill is passing through Parliament now. It offers all of us, across parties, a real opportunity to use amendments to improve how Social Security Scotland works, to ensure that more people get what they deserve and that we hold the agency accountable for its performance day in, day out. I would be keen to work with the minister, the cabinet secretary and others as we lodge stage 2 amendments.

I will briefly bring up one other topic that a number of stakeholders have brought to my attention over the past few months. In Scotland, people need to interact with three different bureaucracies to access the full range of benefits that make up social security. Claimants have to interact with the DWP, Social Security Scotland and, sometimes, their local authority to access the support that they need. It has been put to me that the interaction between those three agencies is not necessarily seamless and that it sometimes puts people off if they have to apply three times to three different agencies to get three different types of benefits.

In a country of our size, we need to do more to bring together those three bureaucracies so that information can be shared better between the three of them and so that people who find it difficult to interact do not have to do it three times. I would appreciate the minister's giving an opinion on that matter and on how to encourage the smoothness of those vital interactions. I am sure that he and all of us will agree that the better those

agencies interact, the easier it is for claimants to access all the support to which they are entitled.

If we want to encourage people to access their full allowance, we must ensure that the process by which they do it is as easy as possible. Our first step in doing so is to ensure that we are providing a usable and easy-to-access service. We have made progress, but we still have a long way to go.

16:42

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I thank my colleague Evelyn Tweed for securing this important debate. It is our duty as elected representatives to ensure that we maximise take-up of social security benefits to those who are eligible. Rightly, we have a system that helps our citizens thrive and provides support when they are in need. Despite the availability of various benefits and extra benefits that are specific only to Scotland, Policy in Practice estimates that the total amount of unclaimed income-related benefits and social tariffs across Britain is now £22.7 billion a year.

Understanding why people are not taking up benefits is really important if we are to increase take-up. Many people simply do not know that they are eligible, while others might be deterred because they feel that the application process is too complex and stigmatising.

It is welcome that we have useful services available to help people to navigate their way through the benefits process, such as citizens advice bureaux, VoiceAbility Scotland and, locally in my constituency, Improving Lives and Working4U. Those are all essential services that can help to assess eligibility for benefits and help people to apply. I highlight the work that the Clydebank Asbestos Group is doing with Unite the union's retired members to maximise take-up of attendance allowance; it is determined to make a difference.

Unfortunately, stigma around claiming benefits continues to discourage people from getting the help that they need. It is up to us to combat the stigma and to change the narrative around benefits. Benefits are a safety net and they are normal; we are all only one life event away from needing to claim them ourselves.

A recent report from the Poverty Alliance Scotland for the collaborative project with the Scottish Government to assess the impacts of poverty-related stigma on benefit take-up found that

"Most Panellists agreed that stigma had gotten worse with austerity, the UK Government's 'welfare reform', and the cost-of-living crisis ... Several spoke of putting off claiming as long as they possibly could, to the point of hunger and destitution,"

which is astonishing and really concerning. In contrast, dealing with Social Security Scotland was viewed as a "less stigmatising experience" than dealing with the DWP. The difference was noted as "night and day," with one person commenting:

"I've only really felt in the past year or two that I've been able to draw breath, basically due to the change in attitude of Scottish government rather than Westminster government. Before that, every assessment was basically panic and dread."

The approaches taken to promote the Scottish child payment were also felt to have been particularly effective. Panellists had seen advertising campaigns on social media and welcomed the more humane language, and 45 per cent of panellists were aware of the Social Security Scotland charter, having received copies of that in the post along with letters. Those really positive comments highlight how Social Security Scotland is tackling stigma to ensure that people feel encouraged to apply for benefits.

More work is, of course, required and I note the recommendations in the Poverty Alliance report, but it is welcome that the Scottish Government, through its benefit take-up strategy, is implementing a range of initiatives, including offering access to independent advocacy support and targeting the marketing of payments.

Social security is an investment in the Scottish people. We must raise awareness and fight stigma to ensure that everyone who is eligible receives the financial support that they so rightly deserve. One big issue facing Scottish families is the UK benefit system's denial of basic subsistence levels. We act to maximise take-up, but the UK Government actively has a policy to deny full entitlement. The two-child limit policy and its abhorrent rape clause, which is favoured by the Labour and Tory parties, affects at least 87,000 children in Scotland. That is an appalling and deliberate denial of take-up that will end only when Scotland is independent and has full power over social security.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan joins us remotely.

16:46

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I begin by thanking Evelyn Tweed for raising this issue in the chamber. We have discussed social security on many occasions, but I thank her for making very important points about stigma and about people's rights and their entitlement to social security.

I listened carefully to the previous speakers and was particularly pleased to hear Christine Grahame's contribution about entitlement and her

point that people should know what their entitlement is.

Research evidence shows that stigma around social security is keenly felt and creates powerful barriers to accessing entitlements. The May 2024 report from the Get Heard Scotland citizens panel on the impact of stigma on benefit uptake found that uncertainty about eligibility and entitlement played into fears about talking with family and friends and the wider community about social security, and that it definitely stopped people even considering whether they might be entitled to something that would improve their quality of life.

Most panellists in that research agreed that stigma had become worse because of austerity, the UK Government's welfare reforms and the cost of living crisis. I am sure that we know from our constituents that, when people feel that the language around that is negative, that hinders or stops them coming forward to receive what they are entitled to.

I am glad that the panellists largely agreed that, although not perfect, dealing with Social Security Scotland is a far less stigmatising experience. We should all be pleased about that. However, I am interested in hearing the minister's remarks about how the Government will ensure that we increase the uptake of benefits because, despite that kinder approach, we need action on uptake, as other members have mentioned.

We know that there have been reports that the system is sluggish or not always straightforward and that there are various hurdles. As the motion states, many benefits remain unclaimed in Scotland. I am sure that the kinder approach shows that the minister and the Government want to ensure that people take up their entitlement.

I will pick up on the point about the economic reality for many of our fellow citizens, concentrating the last part of my contribution on children in Scotland. We know that a quarter of children in Scotland are growing up in poverty and that we need solutions to ensure that children have a fair chance of a life free from hardship and with opportunities.

To do that, we need a good social security system to allow children and families the opportunity to flourish. If we can do that for children and families, the ripple will help right across society, which is so important. That is why we must strive to ensure that people know that the welfare state is there for everyone in their time of need. When we support and help families to find ways out of poverty, and when we provide a social security system that is based on compassion, dignity and a person-centred approach, the benefits are multiplied, and they apply to everyone in our society.

I thank Evelyn Tweed for the mention of third sector organisations in her motion. Whenever they can, those organisations maximise people's understanding of and opportunity to access the benefits system. Other members will know from speaking with constituents that Citizens Advice Scotland, Age UK and other organisations across the sector are praised by people for the help that they offer.

I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I know that everyone in the chamber wants stigma to be removed from people who require to access benefits and social security. I would really welcome the minister's contribution on what the next steps will be to ensure that we maximise the entitlement uptake for everyone.

16:51

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Evelyn Tweed on securing today's debate. With the on-going cost of living crisis, it is more important than ever that people receive all the support that they are entitled to.

Recent analysis by Policy in Practice found that, across Great Britain, the value of unclaimed income-related benefits, disability benefits, discretionary support and social tariffs exceeds £30 billion a year. That is a staggering amount of money that could and should be in the pockets of the people in our society who need it most. It shows that too many people are unaware of the support that is available to them or are facing barriers in accessing it.

It is crucial that we tackle these issues, and many services out there are doing just that. For people in East Kilbride, that includes the brilliant East Kilbride Citizens Advice Bureau, as well as local Christians Against Poverty representatives and advocates from VoiceAbility. In addition, my office is always there to help people in East Kilbride who do not know where to turn.

There are national services that offer benefits advice and entitlement checks, including through health charities for people with disabilities and Age UK for older people. Advice Direct Scotland's benefits calculator allows people to check their entitlement to both devolved and reserved benefits. It has already been used by 56,000 people to identify more than £43 million in unclaimed money. There is no doubt that that has been a lifeline for people.

As Evelyn Tweed pointed out, 25 per cent of the people who are eligible for the young carer grant do not claim it. Furthermore, Policy in Practice's data shows that more than £2 billion per year of carers allowance goes unclaimed in Great Britain. Part of that is perhaps due to people not

identifying themselves as carers, but I encourage those who are out of work or on a low income to find out more about the benefit if they help to look after someone, whether that be with emotional support, giving medication, doing food shopping or assisting with personal care or grooming.

The Scottish National Party Scottish Government has already delivered a supplement to increase the income of unpaid carers, and it is now rolling out a replacement for the carers allowance: the new carer support payment, which will be open to people in East Kilbride from 24 June. Crucially, the Scottish benefit has wider eligibility that includes many full-time students. With that extra eligibility, it is crucial that people know about the payment, and I welcome the Scottish Government's strategy to publicise it, as well as its work to increase benefits uptake in general. I hope that today's debate helps to raise more awareness.

I said earlier that part of the £30 billion figure relates to unclaimed social tariffs. Currently, such schemes are few and far between. However, as our First Minister, John Swinney, set out yesterday, electing Scottish National Party candidates such as Grant Costello, who is standing to be the MP for East Kilbride and Strathaven, will mean that we will have MPs who will press the next UK Government to deliver social tariffs for energy—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Stevenson, could you resume your seat for a second? It has been made clear over recent weeks that we should not be electioneering. This is not a hustings—this is a meeting of the Parliament, so we should refrain from such activity.

Collette Stevenson: My apologies, Presiding Officer.

We want the UK Government to deliver social tariffs for energy, broadband and mobile bills. Our plan will drive down utility costs for people who are on a low income, disabled or elderly.

There is much more that I could say on the topic, but I will conclude. It is important that we encourage people who are really struggling during the cost of living crisis to check what they are entitled to and to get the support that they deserve. We should all be committed to ensuring that our social security system is well funded and well advertised.

16:56

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join members in thanking Evelyn Tweed for lodging her motion for debate. I also congratulate her and her team on the very good work that they do in the Stirling area—in particular,

the round-table events that have been organised have been very useful.

The Stirling area exemplifies many of the challenges that we face in supporting people across Scotland who are in poverty. Stirling has one of the biggest income-inequality divides in the country. Even in relatively affluent communities, there are people who are desperately in need of help, who are often very difficult to identify and support.

A lot of the issue comes back to stigma. Marie McNair talked about difficulties with stigma, as did Carol Mochan. We must break down the stigma. The language that the Westminster Government has used about the welfare state does not help to remove the stigma that exists in people's minds.

Recently, I met Stirling District Citizens Advice Bureau, which is an incredible organisation that provides advice to thousands of people across the Stirling area. It told me that it has experienced a 43 per cent increase in demand for its services in recent years. Between 2020 and 2023, it experienced a 16-fold increase in the number of people who sought assistance for mortgage arrears. The number of council tenants who have sought help with rent has quadrupled in the past five years. Recently, there has been a spike in the number of people who face serious housing insecurity. The number of people who came through its doors because they faced homelessness more than tripled in 2022-23.

That is not a situation that is being seen only by the CAB in Stirling. According to the Poverty Alliance, more than two thirds of the children who live in poverty are now in working households.

Those are all deeply worrying statistics. They should be a wake-up call for decision makers here and at Westminster. As we have already heard, the cost of living crisis, with high energy bills and inflation, is really squeezing household budgets, which is making it more difficult than ever for people to make mortgage and rent payments.

Despite that, as we have heard, in 2023, £19 billion-worth of benefits went unclaimed across the UK. Successive Westminster Governments have treated social security as a drain on the public purse, not as an investment in society, which it truly is. The provision of social security is about helping people.

The two-child limit is a perfect example of austerity politics harming our welfare state. Any incoming UK Government must urgently address that wrong, remove the two-child limit from universal credit, dismantle the barriers that have deliberately been put in place to reduce access to social security, which include the injustice of arbitrary sanctions, and accelerate efforts to raise awareness of eligibility.

The policies that we have agreed to in the Scottish Parliament are keeping people out of poverty. This year, they will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty and 70,000 children out of absolute poverty. However, even though we have made great strides, as we have heard, 25 per cent of young carers do not claim the support that they are entitled to, and it is estimated that the take-up rate of the Scottish child payment for children aged between six and 15 is still languishing at 77 per cent.

I understand that the Scottish Government is delivering a programme of activity to raise awareness of Scottish benefits and to ensure that everyone receives what they are entitled to. I agree with members that the third sector advice organisations are essential partners in ensuring that communities get the level of the support that they need.

Evelyn Tweed has already pointed to some of the great work that is being done in the Raploch in community settings to address the issue of stigma. Christine Grahame mentioned an example from the Borders, and Colette Stevenson mentioned one from her constituency.

I hope that the Scottish Government's plans to increase benefit uptake include organisations such as the CABs from the outset—rather than just focusing in on the housing teams in councils—because they have a critical role to play; they can reach the parts of our communities that other organisations may not.

Of course we can make progress and increase the Scottish child payment, but we do not have all powers over welfare benefits; we need to focus on the powers that we have, to increase benefit uptake. In particular, offering targeted advice in communities is something that the Government can act on today.

17:01

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I apologise for coughing throughout the debate. I thank my colleague Evelyn Tweed for the opportunity to discuss this vital issue in the chamber. As she highlighted, the current economic climate means that it has never been more important to encourage and support people to access all the assistance that they are entitled to.

In total, our investment in social security benefits and payments in 2023-24 amounted to an estimated £5.3 billion, despite the on-going pressures on public finances, the spending cuts, the cost of living crisis and the inflationary pressures that we have had to wrestle with.

Since the devolution of Scotland's social security powers in 2016, we have been clear that maximising the take-up of Scottish benefits is a fundamental priority for the Scottish Government. Our benefit take-up strategy sets out the principles by which we do that. I will touch on that later.

Those principles are applied through a number of specific take-up initiatives, including access to independent advocacy, which has been mentioned by a few members, continued investment in accessible advice, including welfare advice and health partnerships, and the targeted marketing of devolved payments. However, and what is perhaps more important, the principles form the fundamental basis for all social security policy development and delivery, ensuring that we prioritise person-centred approaches and put the needs of the people of Scotland at the heart of everything that we do.

I will touch on take-up rates, which have been mentioned. Our most recently published annual take-up rates give us much to be proud of. I am particularly heartened by the high and stable take-up of our five family payments, including the Scottish child payment. Given that the First Minister is crystal clear that his single most important objective is the eradication of child poverty, it is reassuring to note that the figures suggest that the vast majority of eligible, low-income families who are in or at risk of being in poverty are taking up those entitlements. However, we know that we cannot be complacent. We can and will do better in some of those areas, as today's motion, rightly, highlights.

Right across the chamber, there has been mention of partnership working, which is incredibly important. I commend the work of Evelyn Tweed in Stirling, as has been mentioned by Mark Ruskell. I know that a lot of other members, across parties, have done something very similar.

We sometimes take for granted the work of our third party agencies; again, I am grateful to them. They tirelessly campaign and advocate on behalf of—and provide essential front-line support to—people up and down the country. Through our benefit take-up stakeholder reference group, we bring together third sector support organisations, public sector delivery partners and social innovation enterprises, whose experience, expertise and extensive networks are essential in informing our benefit take-up approach and driving continuous improvement.

Furthermore, just last year, we launched a dedicated engagement forum specifically for benefit calculator providers—a sector that I was glad to see was mentioned in the motion. Often, their tools offer a crucial first step in people's journey to accessing their entitlements and can

help to cut through the complex landscape of online information and interacting systems.

Although it is clear that online tools can offer great value in simplifying access to eligibility information across devolved and reserved systems, there is no substitute for accredited welfare rights advice. In recognition of that, the Scottish Government has allocated in 2024-25 more than £12 million to support the provision of free income maximisation, welfare and debt advice services. That includes funding to a range of advice providers, including Citizens Advice Scotland and its network of bureaux, StepChange Debt Charity, Advice Direct Scotland and One Parent Families Scotland. My responsibilities include debt and welfare advice, and I have visited all those organisations and seen their fantastic work.

The funding also includes investment in the aforementioned welfare advice and health partnerships, which will see welfare rights advisers being placed in more than 160 practices across Scotland, including four in Stirling, which is in Mark Ruskell's region. That approach will make advice available in accessible and non-stigmatising settings where people already go. It will also have the dual advantage of reaching people who have not yet engaged with traditional advice services and reducing the time spent by general practitioners and other clinical staff on non-clinical matters.

It is important to mention the situation in relation to reserved benefits. It is clear that benefits delivered in Scotland, especially the Scottish Government's seven payments that are available only here, are changing people's lives. In 2024-25, we are committing a record £6.3 billion to benefits expenditure—that is, £1.1 billion more than the UK Government gives to the Scottish Government for social security. That investment supports disabled people to live full and independent lives, helps older people to heat their homes in winter and aids low-income families with their living costs. However, we continue to operate with one hand tied behind our back due to the cruel policies and devastating austerity that have been imposed by Westminster Governments. Immoral policies such as the two-child cap, which Mark Ruskell mentioned, continue to be supported by Conservative and Labour leaders at Westminster, which will ultimately put more pressure on the financial support that the Scottish Government is able to deliver.

A number of members have mentioned stigma, which occurs right across the age groups. As Christine Grahame mentioned, the right to social security is a human right and an entitlement. People should not feel stigma about it, but many do. That is still an issue. Discriminatory and

stigmatising narratives have no place in the modern progressive society that we should all be striving for.

I will now touch on other members' contributions. Evelyn Tweed spoke about visiting various food banks. I remember going to visit my local food bank after the universal credit uplift was cancelled. In the first month afterwards, there was an 80 per cent increase in the number of applications, and the figure is still at that high level. Some months ago, I visited One Parent Families Scotland and spoke to young women who were involved with that organisation. Many of them did not know about their entitlement.

Christine Grahame mentioned pension credit, which is a subject that we have had to deal with for decades. I know that Ms Grahame has mentioned it in the chamber on a number of occasions.

Jeremy Balfour touched on take-up of benefits and what we could do to improve it. The benefits take-up strategy was published in 2021, and it is important to say that an update is due in 2026.

Mr Balfour raised another key issue, which was about comparing rates of uptake and the processing times involved. Those times have improved over the past year or so, and they will continue to improve. I know that Mr Balfour has raised the matter with the cabinet secretary and that there is much work still to do on that.

We know that claimant satisfaction rates for Social Security Scotland are substantially higher than those for the DWP. For example, they are 92 per cent for disability payments, 93 per cent for the applications process, and 92 per cent for decisions in Scotland, compared with about 77 per cent for disability payments and 79 per cent for decisions under the UK system.

Mr Balfour mentioned a number of other aspects, such as interactions with some of the organisations and charities that are involved in the sector. We discussed those when we were both members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Work still needs to be done on them.

Marie McNair talked about the advocacy support that is provided by organisations such as VoiceAbility. The essentials guarantee is another issue that several members covered.

Carol Mochan touched on moving away from stigma, which is an incredibly important issue. I hope that her colleagues in the Labour Party will work on that if they take power at Westminster in a couple of weeks, which it looks as though they will do. A key thing would be to consider the rate of universal credit and re-examining local housing allowance, both of which are incredibly important.

Collette Stevenson also mentioned VoiceAbility. I commend its work and that of Advice Direct Scotland, which I have worked with on a number of occasions.

Another key issue that Mark Ruskell mentioned is the importance of the role of MSPs, including the work that Evelyn Tweed has been doing. A number of members have arranged round-table meetings, for example

I return to the topic of stigma. The Scottish Government commissioned the Poverty Alliance to run a citizens panel to explore the impact of stigma on benefit take-up. The recommendations from that work, as well as the findings from a separate commissioned evidence review on seldom-heard groups, will form the basis for the action plan that I mentioned, which will be published later this year.

I note that Evelyn Tweed's motion has achieved cross-party support. We hope that the principle underlying the motion enjoys popular support from members across the chamber. It should, after all, be uncontroversial to want to ensure that the people whom we represent are able to afford the basic cost of living, particularly at a time of such economic uncertainty. With that in mind, I thank Evelyn Tweed for bringing this vital subject to the chamber, and I implore members of all parties to join me in commending her motion.

Meeting closed at 17:10.

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