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Thursday 26 September 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Proposed Ticket Levy	1
Fairer Futures Partnerships (Child Poverty).....	2
General Practitioner Appointments.....	3
Ninewells Hospital (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit).....	5
Holyrood Park	6
LGBT Youth Scotland (Safeguarding).....	6
National Review of Eating Disorder Services.....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Alistair Wilson Case.....	10
Homelessness Figures	14
ScotRail Peak Fares Removal Pilot.....	16
Energy Prices (Low-income Households)	18
999 Control Rooms (Domestic Abuse Experts).....	20
Violent Crime (Young People)	21
Organ Donation Week	22
Social Media (Dangers of Overuse)	23
Insulin Supply	23
International Week of Deaf People.....	24
A75 (Improvements)	24
Financial Services.....	25
Creative Scotland (Funding).....	26
FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER AWARENESS MONTH	28
<i>Motion debated—[Rona Mackay].</i>	
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	28
Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)	31
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	32
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	34
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green).....	35
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	37
The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto).....	37
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	41
NET ZERO AND ENERGY, AND TRANSPORT	41
ScotRail (Reduced Timetable).....	41
Grangemouth (Just Transition Commission Report).....	42
Onshore Wind Turbines (Review of Noise Guidance).....	44
Energy Price Cap.....	45
Ports (Infrastructure Upgrading).....	46
Energy Price Cap (Heat Networks)	47
Proposed Heat in Buildings Bill	49
Green Hydrogen Sector.....	50
PRINCESS ALEXANDRA EYE PAVILION	52
<i>Statement—[Neil Gray].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray).....	52
UKRAINE	64
<i>Motion moved—[Shirley-Anne Somerville].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	64
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	68
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	71
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	73
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	75
Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP).....	78
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	80
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	82

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	85
Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	87
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	89
Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP).....	91
Patrick Harvie	93
Foyso! Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	95
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	97
The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart).....	99
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	103
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	104

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 26 September 2024

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

General Question Time

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

Proposed Ticket Levy

1. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with the Music Venue Trust regarding the introduction of a ticket levy, on a voluntary or statutory basis, for stadium and arena shows, to support grass-roots culture venues. (S6O-03773)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government fully values both the importance of the music industry to Scotland's culture and the role that venues play in the talent pipeline. I met the Music Venue Trust in May to discuss the difficulties that the industry faces at grass-roots level and the proposal for a ticket levy to alleviate those and to help build a sustainable live music ecosystem. The Scottish Government is keen to continue to engage with the industry to support sector-led initiatives.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has met the Music Venue Trust. However, I am not quite clear whether he has expressed a view on the basic policy yet.

This summer, as the cabinet secretary will know, there have been huge stadium performances in Scotland by the likes of Taylor Swift, Foo Fighters and Pink. The Music Venue Trust has shown that the introduction of a levy, which has already been done in countries such as France, could raise well over £1 million a year to support the sector during a very difficult time.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary is well aware of the cultural importance of independent venues, which are not necessarily charitable—

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, please, Mr Harvie?

Patrick Harvie: Some are commercial, some are funded and some are not. A levy would be a really powerful measure to support venues that are integral to the culture of our towns and cities.

Angus Robertson: I agree with Patrick Harvie about the importance of agreeing to support

venues. I raised that issue with my culture secretary opposite number in the previous United Kingdom Government, and I will raise it with Lisa Nandy of the new UK Government.

Patrick Harvie will appreciate that the proposal involves significant reserved powers. I am keen to better understand its deliverability, which is part of a dialogue that I look forward to continuing to have with the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Despite the financial implications of the new Labour Government's financial decisions, it is welcome that the Scottish National Party Government is still increasing funding to the culture sector by almost £16 million this financial year to a total of £196.6 million. Will the cabinet secretary outline how that funding and the money that is being sent out by Creative Scotland ensure support for culture venues throughout Scotland?

Angus Robertson: The additional £15.8 million in culture funding this financial year is the first stage in our commitment to £100 million more per year for culture funding by 2028-29. The additional funding this financial year includes £13.2 million for Creative Scotland, which is being used to support its network of regularly funded organisations, including the Scottish Music Industry Association, as well as providing additional funding towards the Creative Scotland open fund for individuals and additional support to Screen Scotland.

Fairer Futures Partnerships (Child Poverty)

2. **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how its investment in fairer futures partnerships will help to tackle child poverty. (S6O-03774)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Through our investment in expanding our fairer futures partnerships, we will work with local authorities to help families get the support that matters to them, focusing on family wellbeing, income maximisation and support for education and sustained employment. It includes a range of services working together across childcare, education, health and social care, housing and employment, the third sector and beyond. The work will develop practical examples and tools to support more effective service delivery that can be used to tackle child poverty across Scotland.

James Dornan: Before I go on to my supplementary question, with members' indulgence, I would like to mention the passing of Councillor Kenny McLean, who was a councillor when I was the leader of Glasgow City Council. He was a hard worker for his constituents in his ward

of Partick East. He was tireless in working for Glasgow, and he was a huge supporter of making Scotland a better place through independence. More importantly, he was a great man, and he will be sadly missed by his family and everybody who knew him. *[Applause.]*

With devolved finances tighter than ever as a result of the United Kingdom Government's decision, how does the cabinet secretary anticipate that fairer futures partnerships will help to laser-focus Scotland's constrained resources and public services on the mission to eradicate child poverty?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I associate myself with James Dornan's remarks about Councillor McLean. He and I were parliamentary researchers in the first intake to Parliament in 1999, and I remember him fondly. His words of wisdom will be greatly missed by me and others.

Despite facing the most challenging financial circumstances since devolution, we are determined to drive forward the national mission to end child poverty. The investment in our fairer futures partnerships will provide a driver to enable local authorities to test and improve how they deliver services, and thus better support families. In that way, the practical examples and tools that are developed will be able to be shared much more widely than simply among the partnership organisations that take part. That is a very important part of our public service reform programme.

General Practitioner Appointments

3. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve access to general practitioner appointments. (S6O-03775)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Last November, the Scottish Government published the "General Practice Access Principles". That report sets out a clear framework for the core principles of how GP services should be delivered—they should be delivered equitably, sensitively, reasonably and appropriately, making the most effective use of the resources and systems that are currently available.

We continue to work with all the relevant partners to effectively implement those principles, including through our commitment to the on-going recruitment of primary care multidisciplinary teams as well as 800 more GPs. Healthcare Improvement Scotland has already worked with more than 100 general practices to improve access arrangements.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but the current situation remains a

disgrace. The move to the increased use of same-day-only appointments, which are rationed at 8 am, simply does not work for the elderly, the disabled or people with young children.

The latest in the long line of complaints that I have had from constituents includes one from an elderly couple in Dumfries—they will probably give me a clip round the ear for saying that the next time I see them—who tried on four occasions to get a doctor's appointment. On day 1, there was a permanent engaged tone at appointment time, so they were unable to speak to a human voice. On day 2, it was the same again—there was a permanent engaged tone. On day 3, having spent 10 minutes getting to the front of a queue, they got a human voice, but there were no doctors available. Only on the fourth day, when they decided to complain to the practice, did they get an appointment. Does the cabinet secretary think that that is acceptable?

Neil Gray: What Oliver Mundell narrates is clearly not acceptable, and I believe that we should see access to GPs improving. We are seeing an increase in the demand on our primary care services, and GPs are under pressure as a result of managing more complex cases. However, it is the responsibility of individual practices to ensure that they have an appointments system that works not just for them, but—most importantly—for their patients. I would be keen to hear more about the case that Oliver Mundell brought up, so that the health board can look into whether the practice in question is fulfilling the terms of the GP contract.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The Scottish Government's "General Practice Access Principles" states that GP practices should

"use digital resources ... where appropriate and when people choose, to meet people's needs."

Deaf people or those with anxiety may find it more difficult to book appointments over the phone, and services such as Near Me are not available everywhere. Does the Scottish Government have further plans to support GPs in adopting digital infrastructure where they are not able to provide such services?

Neil Gray: I thank Foyso Choudhury for narrating the complex picture of how people choose to access their health services—in this case, primary care services. He is right to say that digital solutions are available for some people who are able to use them, but I am clear that that will not work for everybody, as he has set out. Therefore, we are supporting practices to be able to invest in not only the access requirements that I set out to Oliver Mundell, but digital services, where that is possible, and I would like more such

support to be provided. We will continue to support boards in that work.

Ninewells Hospital (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit)

4. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to concerns over its reported plans to downgrade the neonatal intensive care unit at Ninewells hospital. (S6O-03776)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Under the new model for neonatal care, which was announced in July 2023, neonatal intensive care will be provided in a smaller number of units with co-located specialist services. The model is based on evidence and clinical advice from neonatal experts, which shows that the most pre-term and sickest babies have a better chance of survival when they are cared for in high-volume specialist neonatal units.

Those specialist intensive care units will be at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, Edinburgh royal infirmary and Aberdeen maternity hospital. Local neonatal units will continue delivering care, including a level of intensive care, to babies who need that and the changes will affect only a small number of the smallest and sickest babies.

Maurice Golden: The report made little, if any, mention of the potential impact on the mental wellbeing of families forced to travel far from home during an already harrowing time. That is unacceptable, so does the minister agree that there should be a fuller assessment before any action is taken?

Jenni Minto: I absolutely recognise how traumatic such circumstances must be for new parents. This model of neonatal care is supported by a range of stakeholders and clinicians. We have consulted through Bliss and with a wider cohort of families. The work is on-going and is now being led by regional clinical leads, who are looking at implementation. Mental health support for families is very much at the centre of the work.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This issue affects not only my constituents who use Ninewells hospital in Dundee but those using Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy. I would want to be able to access the best care for my family, but my concern is that ever-greater specialism leads to ever-greater centralisation, which leads to deskilling in regional facilities. How will the minister make a judgement about when specialism and centralisation have gone far enough? We must maintain skills in regional centres so that everyone can get access to the best care at their local facility.

Jenni Minto: That is exactly what drives our decision making, which was led by experts in the

neonatal sphere of health services and builds on international evidence. It is incredibly important to ensure the safety and health of the smallest and sickest babies. That has been absolutely central to all the work and to all the evidence that has been pulled together.

Holyrood Park

5. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recently published Holyrood park strategic plan, what the timeline is for Historic Environment Scotland to complete its movement strategy and deliver on its 10 objectives for the park. (S6O-03777)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Questions regarding day-to-day operational matters for Historic Environment Scotland, including queries relating to the management of Holyrood park, are best answered directly by Historic Environment Scotland, so I will ask HES to write to the member with a full reply to her question.

Lorna Slater: Holyrood park's legislation is decades out of date and does not align with council or Government climate targets or with the City of Edinburgh Council mobility plan. Will the cabinet secretary look at updating the park's legislation and consider reducing or restricting private car use in Holyrood Park in order to ensure that the park is net zero by 2030, as the new strategic plan sets out?

Angus Robertson: Yesterday, I met the new chief executive of Historic Environment Scotland, Katerina Brown, and I am pleased to say that we have a shared ambition for Historic Environment Scotland. I am sure that she and her colleagues have been listening closely to what Lorna Slater has asked. Given her supplementary question, I will raise those issues with officials and will revert to her in writing.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

LGBT Youth Scotland (Safeguarding)

7. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will review its relationship with LGBT Youth Scotland, in light of reported allegations regarding safeguarding failings. (S6O-03779)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I, too, would like to mark the passing of Councillor McLean, who was a councillor in my Glasgow Kelvin constituency and a friend.

The Scottish Government has engaged with LGBT Youth Scotland to determine the facts around the recent media reports and we have

determined that no further action is needed at this stage. I refer the member to LGBT Youth Scotland's recent statement, which reinforces how it has strengthened its safeguarding policies over the past five years to ensure that they are in line with legislation and meet national standards. The organisation continues to review its safeguarding policies annually to ensure that they are as comprehensive as possible.

Meghan Gallacher: Children in Need, which awarded LGBT Youth Scotland £181,000 over the past five years, has decided to withdraw its funding. The BBC said that its charity has immediately suspended the grant after conducting a thorough review in response to concerns that have been raised by the BBC and others. That comes after the *Daily Mail* published a damning investigation of LGBT Youth Scotland, whose former chief executive James Rennie was jailed for horrific child sex assaults after he was unmasked as a member of one of Britain's worst-ever paedophile rings.

I have raised concerns in the chamber about LGBT Youth Scotland and the guidance that it provides to children and young people regarding safeguarding, yet another scandal has now emerged. Convicted paedophile Andrew Easton co-authored guidance with LGBT Youth Scotland on coming out as transgender for children as young as 13. If there is no further case to be answered, why have those safeguarding failings occurred in the first place? Why has Children in Need removed its funding? Why has the Scottish Government not agreed to conduct, at the very least, a review of LGBT Youth Scotland regarding what has happened in recent times?

Kaukab Stewart: The member has raised several points that I am not able to answer in such a short time. However, I would be happy to put further comments in writing.

We are committed to advancing equality and supporting LGBTQI+ young people, including through funding of LGBT Youth Scotland. That is particularly important at a time when we are seeing a rise in attacks against the LGBTQI+ community.

I point out that LGBT Youth Scotland is not under any criminal investigation. Recent media reports related to a convicted individual who was a young person when he attended the charity in 2009 but was not a volunteer or a paid employee.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is so important that children and young people have somewhere that they can go where they can expect care, safety and advice, even if, sadly, that is not at home. What is the Scottish Government doing to support LGBTQ young

people and ensure that they grow up feeling supported?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Emma Roddick for the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to doing everything that we can to ensure that Scotland is the best place to grow up for LGBTQI+ young people. As I said, that is particularly important as we are seeing a rise in attacks against that community.

We are providing £290,870-worth of funding to LGBT Youth Scotland for 2024-25, through our equality and human rights fund, to deliver a range of projects to support LGBTQI+ young people. We have also made significant progress in embedding LGBTQI+ inclusive education across the curriculum, rather than in specific LGBTQI+ lessons, to improve the learning environment for all children and young people.

National Review of Eating Disorder Services

8. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the implementation of the recommendations from the national review of eating disorder services. (S6O-03780)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government is committed to implementing the recommendations of the national review of eating disorder services. We have established the national eating disorder network, which is supporting us to deliver on the review's medium and long-term recommendations. Additionally, we have established an eating disorder lived experience panel to support the work of the network. The national specification for care and treatment of eating disorders in Scotland, which outlines the national standards of service that anyone who is impacted by eating disorders can expect from services, will be published this year.

Kevin Stewart: Will the minister outline what action the national eating disorder network is taking to improve training, national-level service development, the setting of quality standards and the co-ordination of research and innovation networks for eating disorders?

Maree Todd: The national eating disorder network is working with NHS Education for Scotland to ensure the accessibility of training for all and to raise awareness of the available training. The network has scheduled regional meetings for clinicians to discuss challenges, share successes, highlight improvement activity and explore opportunities to work regionally to improve consistency of access. A series of webinars to be offered by the network will focus on research and innovation in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom and offer insights into practical

implementation. The network will also consider how to tackle gaps in research, and it will work closely with boards to support the implementation of the national specification.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Alistair Wilson Case

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests; my wife is a sergeant with Police Scotland.

November will mark 20 years since Alistair Wilson was murdered on the doorstep of his home in Nairn. In two decades, his killer has never been caught. Alistair's family have spoken with *The Press and Journal* and raised serious concerns about Police Scotland and Chief Constable Jo Farrell.

Andrew Wilson was four when his father was murdered. This week, he said:

"we question why our family is still being kept in the dark while Jo Farrell is basking in the media spotlight as she talks of building bridges and providing confidence to our family.

We don't know whether Jo Farrell has been confused or perhaps even caught in a lie, but she has certainly failed to reassure us that she has a grip on this worsening situation."

Alistair Wilson's family describe the conduct of the chief constable as "insulting" and "callous". Does the First Minister agree with the family of Alistair Wilson?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Obviously, this is an incredibly sensitive case. First, I express my sympathy to the Wilson family for the tragedy that they suffered almost 20 years ago. I share their frustration that the case has not been resolved.

Douglas Ross will know that there has been extensive intervention and investigation to try to identify who was responsible for the murder of Alistair Wilson. I very much welcome the fact that the Lord Advocate—who, as Mr Ross will understand, is the independent head of the prosecution service—has instructed that a fresh investigation be undertaken of the case.

On Douglas Ross's point about the actions of the chief constable, he will, again, appreciate that the police operate with absolute operational independence from the Government. It would be inappropriate of me to indicate any opinion on the stance that has been taken by the chief constable. The matter is for the chief constable to address. Certainly, the First Minister should not indicate to the chief constable what actions she should take in relation to a live investigation.

Douglas Ross: I know the situation very well. My question is not about the live police investigation but about the comments this week of

a family who are still grieving their loss in horrific circumstances. The response from Police Scotland, following the decision by the Lord Advocate, clearly falls below any standard that we should expect—particularly from the chief constable of Police Scotland.

I hope that the First Minister will at least reflect on that language—“insulting” and “callous”. The chief constable is being described by a grieving family as “callous”. I hope that the First Minister will reflect on that and seek to address what could happen.

Alistair Wilson’s case has been unsolved for two decades. That period has spanned the tenures of several chief constables and several Government ministers. The Wilson family have raised concerns about the current chief constable’s handling of the case. However, the Scottish Government is not powerless in the situation; indeed, the First Minister has previously spoken about on-going police investigations in his own constituency. Has he or his justice secretary spoken to the family of Alistair Wilson about their significant concerns? If so, what is being done to address those?

The First Minister: I do not want, in any way, to create any sense that I am not sympathetic and empathetic to the situation in which the Wilson family find themselves. Alistair Wilson was murdered on his own doorstep, and his killer or killers have not been brought to justice. That deeply concerns me.

It is important that I place it on the record that Police Scotland has had formidable success in resolving cases of murder—some of them long in the past—because of improvements in investigative procedures and practices. Those have resulted in a number of people being brought to justice who had previously remained free, having committed some of the worst crimes imaginable in our society. Police Scotland focuses on resolving such matters. That is why I said in my first response to Mr Ross that I welcome the Lord Advocate’s instruction for a further investigation of the case.

Neither I nor the justice secretary have spoken to the Wilson family about their concerns. Mr Ross raises the fact that I have expressed points in relation to previous cases in my own constituency. I say to him, respectfully, that I did that when I was on the back benches; I was not First Minister. It is a very different matter when the First Minister starts commenting on live cases. I need to avoid doing that for the sake of protecting the constitutional separation of responsibility for operational matters that lies with Police Scotland.

I say to Mr Ross that I have every sympathy with the Wilson family. I hope that the actions that the Lord Advocate is taking, which have now been

pursued by Police Scotland, will provide a resolution to their deep concerns.

Douglas Ross: In December last year, the Wilson family complained to the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner about the handling of the police investigation. If we consider the issue of police complaints more widely across the country, we should remember that the current system was set up by the Scottish National Party Government when it centralised Scotland’s police forces back in 2013. The Wilson family’s experience clearly shows that the current system is not fit for purpose.

The Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill, which is currently before Parliament, aims to address those failings, but there are still areas where the system falls short. Just yesterday, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland called for an amendment to the bill that would allow officers to face criminal charges if they abused their positions. I agree with that proposal. I confirm that Scottish Conservatives have lodged an amendment that would add such a provision to the bill, which the Criminal Justice Committee will consider next week. Will the First Minister back the inspectorate’s calls and support the Scottish Conservatives’ amendment, to ensure that any police officers who abuse their positions are held to account?

The First Minister: I have a great deal of sympathy with the point that Mr Ross has raised with me. Ministers will look carefully at the amendment that comes forward at stage 2. The purposes of the Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill, which I began scrutinising when I was on the back benches and sat on the Criminal Justice Committee, are coming to stage 2 proceedings in committee; Parliament supported the bill at stage 1.

The issues that His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary raised in its proposal have not been the subject of consultation as part of the preparation of the bill, so we have to be mindful of that when considering any amendments that are lodged. Parliament prefers to ensure that issues are the subject of consultation.

Having said that, I am sympathetic to the point that Douglas Ross raises. I want to ensure that the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner is able to undertake the types of functions that both Mr Ross and I would want them to undertake. That has to be effective, it has to be transparent and it has to be challenging. As the bill takes its passage through Parliament, I give Mr Ross the assurance that ministers will look carefully at and consider carefully any proposals that will work to strengthen the test that I have put to Parliament.

Douglas Ross: We would welcome that, because our amendment would strengthen the bill and fill a void that even HMIC has recognised.

The truth is that, although Police Scotland may have let down the Wilson family, the Government has been letting down police officers and the communities that they serve across Scotland. Officer numbers are now at their lowest level for 17 years. The SNP used to promise that it would put 1,000 additional officers on Scotland's streets, but numbers are down by 1,200 compared with when the SNP created Police Scotland a decade ago.

The number of major investigation team detective inspectors—who investigate the most serious crimes, including murders such as that of Alistair Wilson—is down by a third. Police Scotland is so stretched that it is no longer able to investigate every crime.

Quite frankly, the SNP has left our police to fight crime with one hand tied behind their back, and the results are clear. Violent crime is at its highest level in a decade, and our prisons are so overwhelmed that SNP ministers have been forced to release prisoners en masse. Does the First Minister agree with his deputy, Kate Forbes, who said that, under the SNP, policing has been “stretched to breaking point”?

The First Minister: I have to put on the record the fact that levels of crime in Scotland are currently at 40-year lows. That is a tribute to the work of police officers who are focusing on tackling crime in localities.

I accept that police numbers have fallen. The last census was at the end of June, when police numbers were sitting at 16,207. That is lower than the Government expected, given that we had provided the police with record funding of £1.55 billion, and I expect those numbers to increase in the next census. It should be of some reassurance to Mr Ross that police numbers are strengthening as a consequence of the significant levels of recruitment that the chief constable and Police Scotland are undertaking at the moment.

There is an inherent contradiction in Mr Ross's question. His accusation is that crime is not being pursued but that the prisons are full. If the prisons are full, that suggests to me that crime is being pursued and that more individuals are being convicted and imprisoned. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I respectfully say to Mr Ross that there are challenges in relation to the work of Police Scotland. Police Scotland will take the necessary steps to investigate crimes where there is evidence to do so, and people will be

prosecuted where there is a case to do so. That is what we would expect, and that is what we would expect in a system in which we have a 40-year low of crime as a consequence of the Government's stewardship of police resources in Scotland.

Homelessness Figures

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Figures published this week have revealed the extent of the homelessness crisis in Scotland. On the Scottish National Party Government's watch, 40,685 homelessness applications were recorded last year, which is the highest number in a decade. As of 31 March this year, there were almost 32,000 live homelessness applications.

Every number represents a human being in desperate need of help and support, but the SNP Government is failing them. In the face of the homelessness crisis, the Parliament shamed the Government into declaring a housing emergency earlier this year, but, despite that, the Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan, insists that the Government has a good track record on tackling homelessness, which is at a decade high.

First Minister, is there a housing emergency or not?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Yes, there is a housing emergency. The Government recognises that and is taking action to remedy it. A range of action is being undertaken to ensure that we improve the availability of accommodation through tackling the issue of voids. Further work is being undertaken to strengthen investment in the construction of new homes and the refurbishment of existing homes to be available for rent, and steps are being taken in the planning system to tackle the housing emergency. The Government is absolutely focused on building on its strong record of house construction to tackle the challenges that we face.

Anas Sarwar: I welcome the fact that the First Minister recognises that there is a housing emergency, but his broader answer demonstrates a Government with its head in the sand—one that is oblivious to the struggles of thousands of Scots who face homelessness as we speak.

Let us look at the facts. Under the present SNP Government, we have the lowest levels of home building by housing associations since Thatcher. Overall, house building is down by 17 per cent, and the affordable home building target is in tatters. Shamefully, we now have record numbers of children in temporary accommodation without a home to call their own—more than 10,000 children have been left homeless on the Government's watch, and the number of young people living in bed and breakfasts has soared by more than 900 per cent in just the past three years.

First Minister, with record levels of homelessness, and with you now agreeing with the declared housing emergency, will you change course, or will you back your out-of-touch housing minister?

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if you could speak through the chair, Mr Sarwar.

The First Minister: Mr Sarwar has challenged me on the Government's record, and he has talked about facts, so allow me to share some facts with the Parliament. Between 2007 and 2024, the Government has been responsible for the construction of an average of 7,750 affordable homes each year. During that period, we endured the financial crash and 14 years of austerity under the Conservative Government. Of course, we now have the prolonging of austerity under the new Labour Government.

Between 1999 and 2007, when Mr Sarwar's party was in charge of the Scottish Government—Jackie Baillie was a minister in that Government for a short period—and when money was so flush that the Labour Government left money in the Treasury kitty unspent, an average of 5,448 affordable homes were built each year. Just so that everybody hears that clearly, I repeat that, at a time of plenty, when the money literally could not be spent in time, an average of 5,448 homes were delivered each year by the Labour Party. Under this Government, the number is 7,750 homes each year, so we are getting on with the job.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister wants to talk about a time when I was 16 years old, not a time when 10,000 children are homeless in Scotland—right now, under this Government's watch. That is the devastating consequence of what the First Minister admitted was a Government that has been too focused on what it cannot do, rather than on what it can do. Scots are left to pay the price for an SNP Government that has lost its way, that is incompetent in government and that is bad with people's money.

Housing in Scotland is completely the responsibility of the SNP Government. After 17 years, when will it take responsibility, rather than always looking for someone else to blame? For the Minister for Housing to claim that the Scottish Government has a proven track record on tackling homelessness when it is at record levels is not just inept but shameful. Paul McLennan simply cannot continue.

Will the First Minister recognise that he has a choice: put up with more failure or get to grips with the housing emergency, sack the housing minister and change direction?

The First Minister: I would just point out to the Parliament that, as usual, when Anas Sarwar is faced with facts that rebut his argument, he always

plays the man and not the issue. That is what Anas Sarwar always does.

Let me come back to the facts. I am not evading our responsibility. Under this Government, we have built 7,750 affordable homes each year on average. In comparison, when Mr Sarwar's party was in charge, when the money was so abundant that ministers could not actually spend it, Labour managed to build only 5,448 houses a year. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: That says to me that this Government is getting on with the job.

Mr Sarwar said that this area of policy is all under the responsibility of the Scottish Government. To an extent, that is true—housing policy is our responsibility. However, there is a budgetary question here. I point out to Mr Sarwar that our capital budget, which is what builds affordable homes, was facing a cut of nearly 9 per cent under the spending plans of the Conservative Government, and the incoming Labour Government is going to carry on with those plans. Our financial transactions budget has been cut by a whopping 62 per cent.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: I have raised with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Prime Minister the total stupidity and folly of presiding over a 62 per cent cut in the financial transactions budget. If Mr Sarwar would like to help Scotland in any way, shape or form, why does he not persuade the United Kingdom Labour Government to desert the Tory agenda and start investing in our country?

ScotRail Peak Fares Removal Pilot

3. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): This week is climate week. The Climate Change Committee tells us that we urgently need to decarbonise transport and get people out of cars and planes and on to buses, trains and their own feet and wheels. The Scottish Government's pilot to abolish peak rail fares, which was championed by the Scottish Greens in Government, ends this week, which will hike up the prices of train fares for many workers and students who do not have any choice about when they travel. Is that the right message for the Scottish Government to send in climate week?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has invested in the pilot exercise. It was due to run for a six-month period; we extended it for a further six months. There has therefore been a year-long pilot to determine whether it was an effective way to deliver modal

shift—which I agree with Lorna Slater must happen—within the resources that we have available. Unfortunately, the pilot showed that not enough difference had been made to the patterns of travel for the investment that was required. We would need to find £40 million to continue with that exercise.

I have gone through the enormous challenges that we face in the public finances on several occasions with Parliament—indeed, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government did so a few weeks ago. However much we wish to take forward the peak fares pilot, we simply do not have the resources to enable that to be the case for the scale of impact that the pilot identified.

We have put in place other measures to discount fares to encourage more travel by train and we will continue with those measures.

Lorna Slater: The First Minister is in luck, because I have a suggestion for how he could raise that money. Oxfam has reported that £21.5 million a year—enough to abolish peak fares for good—could be raised through a tax on private jets, assuming that it was embedded in the air departure tax, which is legislation that Parliament passed seven years ago but has not acted on. We all understand the need to ensure an exemption to the air departure tax for our island communities. Will the First Minister work with the United Kingdom Government to urgently introduce that tax so that commuters can once again have fair prices on our trains?

The First Minister: Lorna Slater makes a very interesting and welcome suggestion. She has provided a complete explanation of the point, because she recognises—as I do—the importance of securing an exemption from air departure tax for the Highlands and Islands. I am glad that there is a point of agreement there. As for taxing private jets, I would be very much in the spirit of doing that.

As Lorna Slater and all members of Parliament will realise, we must agree on the terms of a budget. The finance secretary and I will be happy to engage with all willing partners around the Parliament, including my friends in the Green Party and in all parts of the parliamentary chamber, on agreeing budget measures as we secure common ground. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members!

The First Minister: In the spirit of collaboration, for which I am absolutely renowned, I will happily take forward those issues with the UK Government, with which I am enjoying such collaborative and co-operative discussions just now, although it could go further on some other questions.

Energy Prices (Low-income Households)

4. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government is having with energy companies regarding a possible “social tariff” to reduce bills for low-income households. (S6F-03402)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has engaged with energy suppliers in recent weeks on the options that are available to reduce bills for households across Scotland. We are now establishing a working group to co-design a social tariff mechanism that would secure cross-sector support and demonstrate the viability and positive outcomes of such a policy to the United Kingdom Government. The Scottish Government will consider eligible fuel types, consumer eligibility, the regulatory environment, funding and delivery.

Emma Roddick: Despite Labour’s pre-election promises, household energy prices are set to rise by £149 in October, and 860,000 Scottish pensioners are to lose out on the winter fuel payment. It is vital that the Scottish Government works on a social tariff to produce a fairer pricing model. Does the First Minister agree that Westminster’s decisions will disproportionately affect people who are living in Scotland and particularly the Highlands and Islands, where the winters are much colder? Has he raised that with the UK Government?

The First Minister: Emma Roddick has raised very serious issues, especially on behalf of her constituents in the Highlands and Islands where, as she correctly indicates, the hardship of the decisions that were made by the United Kingdom Government to end the universal winter fuel payment will have a particularly acute effect because of the habitual differential temperatures in the Highlands and Islands. I recognise those issues and the Scottish Government has raised those points with the United Kingdom Government. As Emma Roddick will know, the issue was essentially landed on the Scottish Government, along with a budget cut of £160 million.

The work that we are undertaking on the co-design of a social tariff is being taken forward by the acting Minister for Climate Action, Dr Allan. We are engaging with relevant parties on that work. The issue requires agreement from the United Kingdom Government and engagement with it, which we will pursue as a consequence of the discussions.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Undoubtedly, this is an important issue. I am sure that, after 17 years, another working group will be widely welcomed.

It is clear that making work pay and accelerating the just transition will also be vital components of reducing bills. To do that, significant investment in renewables needs to come from the whole of the UK working together. GB energy, which will be headquartered in Aberdeen, will play a crucial role in bringing down bills and delivering energy security. Recently, Scottish National Party MPs failed to vote for GB energy. Will the First Minister confirm that a publicly owned energy generation company, based in Aberdeen, will have the support of the Government? What work is he doing in his renewed constructive relationship with UK ministers to move those issues forward?

The First Minister: I could almost suggest that Mr O’Kane has asked a planted question to allow me to talk about the virtues of my collaboration with the United Kingdom Government, which I will happily do. Last Thursday evening, the acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy and I had the pleasure of meeting the chair of GB energy, Juergen Maier, who was generous with the time given to me. We spent several hours discussing GB energy’s plans. On Friday morning, Juergen Maier came to a meeting of the Scottish energy advisory board, which I chair with Professor Sir Jim McDonald, the principal of the University of Strathclyde, to further discuss the issues with a much wider range of stakeholders.

I am absolutely certain that GB energy will not be an energy generation company any time soon—I am absolutely convinced of that. It may be a helpful vehicle in arranging and collaborating on investment proposals, which we will happily engage with it on, but I do not think that Mr O’Kane can sustain the line of argument that GB energy will be an energy generator, because it ain’t going to be that any time soon. We will work with GB energy. We have had constructive discussions, and a lot of projects are already in the pipeline—we are supporting them with investment from the Scottish National Investment Bank. If there is other investment support from GB energy or the national wealth fund, we will welcome that and we will work collaboratively to produce a good outcome for Scotland.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In listening to the interaction between Emma Roddick and the First Minister on raising energy bills, it strikes me that we could get agreement across the chamber on those in our communities who are housebound, and potentially have disabilities, who have high levels of energy use. First Minister, are they not the first people whom we should be supporting?

The First Minister: Mr Whittle raises a really important issue in highlighting the fact that individuals who are not on particularly high incomes and who may be just above the pension

credit threshold, which is not very high—if my memory serves me right, somebody on an income of about £12,000 will be above the threshold—could be in the situation that he describes, in which they have very high energy use because of their physical condition and their needs but they will not be eligible for a winter fuel payment. That is why the universality of the payment to date has been important.

I am sympathetic to exploring what more we can do to help individuals, but I am sure that Mr Whittle will understand the difficulty that I face, given that we have had an abrupt removal of £160 million from our public finances, which prevents us from delivering a universal benefit, much as I would like to do so.

999 Control Rooms (Domestic Abuse Experts)

5. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government plans to embed domestic abuse experts in 999 control rooms, similar to plans announced by the United Kingdom Government for England and Wales. (S6F-03383)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Police Scotland’s contact assessment model already ensures that people receive the support and safeguarding that they need in a timely fashion when they are in contact with control rooms. That is primarily an operational matter for Police Scotland, but we will be interested to see how the pilot proposals in England and Wales develop, and we will want to see the outcomes and benefits that they bring to victims of domestic abuse, which is of paramount importance to us.

Pam Gosal: Police Scotland responds to a domestic abuse call every nine minutes. That means that, every nine minutes, a potential victim is in need of urgent assistance. It is worth examining whether having domestic abuse experts in 999 control rooms would make a difference. I have also put forward proposals, in my “United Against Violence” paper, to expand training so that all front-line public sector workers can understand and spot the warning signs of domestic abuse. Would the First Minister consider introducing such a scheme?

The First Minister: I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs met Pam Gosal to discuss that and other questions yesterday, and I am very interested in her proposals. We need to do all that we possibly can to ensure that those who experience domestic abuse are able to receive the support that they require. It should be stated that domestic violence should not be happening in any circumstance whatsoever but, where it happens, we should provide support, so I am open to discussing the issues that Pam Gosal puts to me today.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the legislative proposals in the Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced this week, that can help to prevent domestic violence. However, does the First Minister agree that it is only by changing social attitudes and specific behaviours of those who perpetrate domestic violence, the vast majority of whom are men, that we will truly see a difference in reducing domestic and gender-based violence?

The First Minister: I agree with Rona Mackay. Those who perpetrate violence and abuse, the majority of whom are men, must change their actions and behaviour, and we must root out and tackle the toxic masculinity culture and gender inequality that leads to violence, harassment, misogyny and abuse against women. We should stand against that, and we should call it out wherever we see it.

Our equally safe strategy is aimed at preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls, and the legislative proposals in the Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill are designed to help us in the process.

I am also very keen to ensure that we work across the chamber to capture some of the thinking that Pam Gosal has put to me in order to make sure that we do everything that we can to address this scourge in our society.

Violent Crime (Young People)

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports regarding the number of young people aged 11 to 14 who are involved in violent crime. (S6F-03394)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is concerned at any increase in violent behaviour involving young people, particularly after so many years of decline. Since 2006-07, there has been a 74 per cent reduction in the number of children who are referred to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration on offence grounds. More generally, for adults, non-sexual violent crime has fallen by 58 per cent since 2008-09, according to the most recent Scottish crime and justice survey.

Our violence prevention framework is delivering a number of key actions for young people, including the recent quit fighting for likes campaign, which aims to prevent the filming and sharing of violent incidents on social media.

Pauline McNeill: Police Scotland data indicates that almost 14,000 violent crimes were committed by children in 2023-24, but, worryingly, there is a

sharp rise in the number of children in the 11 to 14 age group being involved or armed with weapons such as knives, blunt objects and bottles. Knives were the most common weapon that was used or present. Concerningly, the chief constable told the Criminal Justice Committee last week that

"the number of assaults on officers by under-18s is on the increase."—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 11 September 2024; c 34.]

Does the First Minister acknowledge that cuts to youth services could have made the problem worse?

YouthLink Scotland and other organisations have criticised the lack of data available. Given the severity of the crimes, what exactly is the Government doing to engage with that age group? On the face of it, it does not appear that the Government is doing much at all.

The First Minister: The Government is taking a number of steps. In the past two years, we have invested more than £4 million to implement the actions that are set out in the violence prevention framework.

We work with a range of partners, including YouthLink Scotland, which Pauline McNeill referred to and which delivers our national No Knives, Better Lives programme. We also work with the Scottish violence reduction unit, which has a formidable track record on tackling knife crime and violent crime, and Medics Against Violence.

I do not say any of that to suggest in any way that there is not a serious issue that has to be confronted. The Government can take a range of measures and we can work with partners.

Over the summer, I met a brave young person who has been very much involved in the *Daily Record* our kids, our future campaign. I warmly commend that young person and the *Daily Record* for the work that they have brought forward. In that conversation, I committed to drawing together representatives of all political parties to reflect on what more we could do to tackle the issue. That will be taken forward. Knowing the deep interest that Pauline McNeill has in the subject, I would welcome her participation in that cross-party summit.

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

Organ Donation Week

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): This week is organ donation week. It is an opportunity to encourage people across Scotland to make known their organ donation wishes, and to explain the importance of sharing a person's organ

donation decision with loved ones, so that that choice can be honoured. I say that as a former liver transplant team nurse.

Will the First Minister provide an update on what action the Scottish Government is taking to promote the importance of organ donation and the importance of people making their wishes known?

The First Minister (John Swinney): A range of awareness campaigns is in place to encourage individuals to take the steps that Emma Harper has set out. That is an important life-saving activity that can involve us all. I use this opportunity to make clear the Government's support for the aspirations that Emma Harper set out.

Social Media (Dangers of Overuse)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): What is the Scottish Government's reaction to the findings in a new study by the World Health Organization that Scottish 13-year-old girls are displaying addictive behaviours towards social media, and that boys of the same age are showing the highest levels of daily gaming? How does the Government plan to manage that potentially dangerous and damaging behaviour?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is a serious issue. As the father of a 13-year-old, I wrestle with those challenges constantly. I say that in all seriousness, given the degree of young people's focus on social media.

We must encourage young people to see social media activity in perspective with the rest of their activities, so encouraging healthy, active lifestyles is important, too. Next week is Scottish women and girls in sport week, and the Government is engaged in a lot of promotional work to encourage more participation and engagement in sporting activity by women and girls. Next week, I will visit UHI Perth in Perth city to support some of that work.

We must encourage the raising of awareness of the dangers of social media and its overuse. Parliament has already discussed some of the very acute dangers. For example, some months ago, Evelyn Tweed put a question to me about the tragic case in Dunblane. We must ensure that there is wide understanding of the difficulties and challenges that can arise from overuse of social media.

Insulin Supply

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have been contacted by Alan Ronald, who is a type 1 diabetic. Last month, he visited more than six different pharmacies before eventually getting insulin in Glasgow. Yesterday, he was told at his diabetic clinic that there were only four vials left in Glasgow, so we can imagine his distress. Will the

First Minister advise what urgent steps are being taken to address the acute shortage of insulin?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is a very important issue. I recognise the importance of individuals having access to insulin supplies. Procurement is undertaken on a United Kingdom-wide basis. I am not familiar with the challenges that Jackie Baillie puts to me about supply and circulation. I will look into that in the aftermath of First Minister's question time, because it is critical that individuals who rely on that supply are able to obtain it. I will write to Jackie Baillie with an update later today.

International Week of Deaf People

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): In the light of this being international week of deaf people, how is the Scottish Government ensuring that Scotland is the best place for deaf people to visit and to live, work and learn in?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I commend my friend and colleague Karen Adam for the tremendous leadership that she offers in this area of policy. She is a champion of the deaf community and raises such issues assiduously.

Our efforts are underpinned by our see hear strategy, which was a product of partnership working with local authorities, health boards and the third sector. See hear funding is used through localised sensory support partnerships, which include the third sector, to help to put supports in place for deaf people. I commend their activity, and I commend Karen Adam for the leadership that she shows on this matter.

A75 (Improvements)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): From a response to my letter to the Prime Minister, I understand that the Department for Transport is still in discussions with His Majesty's Treasury regarding the £8 million committed by the former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to fund a study on the A75. I am also aware that the Secretary of State for Transport has met the cabinet secretary to discuss shared transport priorities.

Will the First Minister update members on any progress that is being made and confirm his commitment to work with the United Kingdom Government to deliver the much-needed bypasses for Crocketford and Springholm? Will the First Minister also agree to meet me and the south-west Scotland transport alliance to consider its calls to form a task force to deliver those urgent improvements?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, let me say that we will engage constructively with the United Kingdom Government on the issue. I know

the importance of the issue to Mr Carson and his constituents, so we will engage constructively on that basis. I would be very happy to meet Mr Carson and his local campaigners to discuss the improvements to the A75 and to take forward that dialogue. It might be beneficial for me to come down to Galloway to have that conversation.

I am aware of there being quite a bit of uncertainty about the funding for particular projects that many of us believed were in the course of being delivered, because of the upcoming budget process and the spending review. I am aware of a number of projects for which the United Kingdom Government is not at this stage able to honour the commitments that were given by the previous Government. Mr Carson will appreciate that that is not an issue that is under my control, but I will engage constructively—as I know the finance secretary is doing with the Treasury—on those points. We can perhaps discuss some of those when I meet Mr Carson and his constituents.

Financial Services

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am aware that the recently published global financial centres index has recognised that Edinburgh continues to further its standing as one of the world's leading financial centres. That is good news for all of Scotland, as is Glasgow's success in climbing up through the rankings. Will the First Minister provide an update on how Scottish Government initiatives are supporting financial services in Scotland to thrive and develop, thereby creating new opportunities, well-paid jobs and sustainable growth?

The First Minister (John Swinney): A formidable amount of work is going on in that area. On Tuesday evening, I had the pleasure of addressing the ethical finance global summit dinner, which took place in Edinburgh, where there was an extensive range of investors who had come to Scotland for a three-day summit on green ethical investments. It was a tremendous showcase opportunity for the Government to engage with.

The Deputy First Minister responded to the report of the Scottish task force for green and sustainable financial services on Wednesday, and the Minister for Business opened the new fintech wing at the Edinburgh Futures Institute and marked the launch of the fintech Scotland festival.

I cite all that activity because it is indicative of the energy that the Government is putting into securing investment. The Global Ethical Finance Initiative has been many years in gestation, but we are now beginning to see the fruits of that activity as a consequence of the sustained focus and leadership of ministers in this Government. I am

delighted to see the progress that has been made in Edinburgh and in the transformation in Glasgow's position in the rankings, which has been significant. That demonstrates the strength of the Scottish financial services sector, of which we should be enormously proud.

Creative Scotland (Funding)

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Following warnings that Scotland faces a "cultural recession", it was reported that Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government were in talks over the immediate future of arts organisations. With decisions on multiyear funding due only weeks away, will the First Minister reassure arts organisations and confirm when funding for Creative Scotland—which will enable it to make those long-term decisions—will be released and how large its budget will be?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am enormously sympathetic to financial support for the artistic and cultural sector in Scotland. It is absolutely fundamental that we have stable and supportive financial arrangements in place for the sector.

The operational challenge is that the Scottish Government does not know what its budget will be for the next financial year. That decision will be influenced significantly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget to be announced on 30 October, so the Government has to wrestle with the challenge of providing assurance when it does not have assurance from the United Kingdom Government. That is nobody's fault—it is just timing.

The one thing that I want to be absolutely crystal clear about to Parliament today is that the Scottish Government will support the cultural sector to fulfil its potential in Scotland. That sector is part of our essential identity as a country. The Government will stand behind it. We simply have to ensure that we have the practical assurance in place to give the financial commitments that Mr Choudhury seeks from me and that, as I quite understand, the cultural sector requires to hear from us.

We are focusing on that question, and the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, is engaged in discussions with Creative Scotland on the best way to navigate our way through those challenges.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In his response to me, the First Minister wanted to put on record that

"levels of crime in Scotland are currently at 40-year lows"—

those are his words. However, we already have a record: the Scottish Government's own statistics,

which were published this summer, said that crime in Scotland from 2022-23 to 2023-24 rose by 4 per cent. How could the crime levels be at their lowest level for 40 years when the Scottish Government's own figures say that they have increased—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, if I might stop you there. As you will be aware, points of order are to be used to address whether proper procedures are or have been followed and they are not to be used to continue debate. There is a mechanism to address inaccurate comments, as the member will be aware, so I am very interested to understand what the point of order is.

Douglas Ross: Presiding Officer, given that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has been sat next to the First Minister today and so the First Minister had that information available, what remedies does the First Minister have at his disposal to update Parliament if he has deliberately or inadvertently misled Parliament on that important issue?

The Presiding Officer: I simply repeat that points of order refer to whether proper procedures have been followed. The content of members' contributions is a matter for members, and members will be aware of the mechanism that exists to address any inaccuracies.

First Minister's questions is concluded. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Rona Mackay. There will be a short suspension to allow the chamber and gallery to clear.

12:49

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Awareness Month

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13767, in the name of Rona Mackay, on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that September 2024 is International Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Awareness Month; recognises that alcohol exposure in pregnancy may lead to permanent harm to the unborn child, with lifelong consequences; understands that FASD is the most common preventable neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland; further understands that at least 3.2% of individuals in Scotland are affected; notes that the Chief Medical Officer's advice is to avoid alcohol if pregnant or if planning to become pregnant; believes that 40% of pregnancies are currently unplanned; recognises what it sees as the importance of early identification and support of FASD to avert negative outcomes, such as addiction, mental ill health, suicidality and judicial system involvement; considers that, with the right support, individuals can prosper in their educational and life endeavours and reach their own potential; recognises what it sees as the excellent work of the FASD Hub Scotland in supporting those with FASD, their families and professionals who work with them; notes the belief that it is important to increase access to awareness and diagnostic training for practitioners to enable access to diagnostic and support services for those with FASD and their families; further notes the belief that alcohol producers should be mandated to provide clear written pregnancy warnings on their products; highlights what it sees as the important work of the pre-conception strategy for Scotland; understands that there is an economic benefit of £1.4 million for each case of FASD that is prevented, and notes the belief that more must be done to reduce alcohol exposure in pregnancy.

12:52

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank all colleagues from across the chamber who signed my motion, which has allowed me to hold this important debate during international fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month. This is the third debate on FASD that I have held in the chamber in the past five years. Once again, I am delighted to be able to raise awareness and to highlight the sterling work of clinicians and researchers.

Around 200,000 people in Scotland—3.2 per cent of our population—have FASD, although that is probably a dramatic underestimate, because FASD is the most common neurodevelopmental problem and it is chronically underdiagnosed.

Amazingly, only around 1 per cent of people have ever been formally diagnosed and properly supported.

FASD is a birth defect; it is not acquired later in life. It is a lifelong, incurable neurodevelopmental condition that is caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb. The only way to avoid it is for pregnant women to abstain from alcohol.

Dr Jonathan Sher, senior fellow of the Queen's Nursing Institute of Scotland, has devoted much of his clinical career to research on and the prevention of FASD in Scotland and internationally. I first heard him speak more than a decade ago when I was involved in the children's hearings system in the east end of Glasgow. That speech made a great impression on me, and it explained many questions that I had about the multiple and recurring issues that were experienced by children who attended the panel.

The condition was first identified in the 1970s and was referred to as fetal alcohol syndrome. At the time, it was identified by distinctive facial characteristics, but it has since been learned that people with certain facial features account for only approximately 10 per cent of those who have FASD—90 per cent cannot be identified by their facial features.

What is known is that 100 per cent of people with FASD have problems relating to three things: an inability to plan, an inability to learn from experience and an inability to control impulses. Those can lead to addiction, mental ill health, suicidality and involvement in the justice system.

I am convener of the women, families and justice cross-party group, which was privileged to have Dr Sher present at a recent meeting. He explained that, with the right support and, crucially, early diagnosis, people can reach their potential and achieve their life goals.

I would also like to mention the former chief inspector of prisons, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, who has considerable expertise in this field. She previously worked in Canada as a teacher, where FASD was recognised as a problem, particularly among the Inuit, who were introduced to alcohol by people who were not native to Canada. At the meeting, Wendy spoke of her experience in Australia, where the prison population included a high number of people with FASD. The problem was diagnosis, and that is the problem here, too.

The Scottish Government takes the subject very seriously. The FASD hub Scotland does excellent work in supporting people with FASD, their families and the professionals who work with them. Diagnostic training for practitioners is crucial in this field, as is alcohol producers' responsibility in relation to prevention of the condition at the pre-conception stage. It is essential that clear written

pregnancy warnings are provided on their products, not least to prevent the condition from happening. In my view, that is the most important factor, but there is an economic benefit of £1.4 million for each case of FASD that is prevented.

The Scottish Government's "Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm" sets out a commitment to increase awareness of FASD and support improved diagnosis. In addition, the women's health plan includes a commitment on pre-pregnancy planning. The right information must be available for people at the right time, including pre-conception. Information is published on NHS Inform and in the "Ready Steady Baby!" book, which provide the clear message, "No alcohol, no risk", whether someone is pregnant or is trying to conceive.

The Government funds two key organisations to deliver the work that the FASD hub does through Adoption UK Scotland, as well as providing support, training and advice to professionals who work with people with FASD. In 2017, Adoption UK conducted a survey of nearly 3,000 adopters, and 70 per cent of respondents said that they were not warned that their child could be at risk of FASD when they adopted.

The Scottish Government also works with the fetal alcohol advisory support and training—FAAST—team at the University of Edinburgh, which, by delivering its diagnostic course to a number of medical professionals, has allowed them to gain the knowledge and skills that they need in order to support and diagnose people with FASD and to translate assessment findings into indications of what post-diagnostic support is needed.

In addition, this year, the Government has allocated £55.5 million to boards via the mental health outcomes framework to improve the quality and delivery of mental health and psychological services for everyone. Work is on-going with the national autism implementation team to develop services around support and diagnosis for neurodivergent adults, including people with FASD.

Progress has been made over the past 19 years, but it has not been made quickly enough, and we must do more. We need to bring about a cultural shift in drinking generally. It is important to say that, today, more young women who are trying to conceive, and expectant mothers, know that they should not drink. However, this is not about naming, blaming and shaming women. The point is that we need to take seriously prevention and pre-conception health education on preparing for pregnancy, which includes preventing FASD. We need early diagnosis and much-raised awareness of the condition. FASD is a preventable condition,

and it is the responsibility of all of us, working together, to prevent it entirely.

12:58

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests: I am a practising national health service general practitioner.

As we recognise international fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month, we must confront the stark realities of the condition. FASD is the most common preventable neurodevelopmental disorder in Scotland, full stop. It is caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol, which is a substance that can inflict irreversible harm on the unborn child.

As healthcare professionals, we see at first hand the lifelong consequences of the condition, not only for the child but for families and society as a whole. It is estimated that between 3 and 5 per cent of people in Scotland could be living with FASD. There are more than 45,000 births each year, and a shocking one in seven newborns is at risk of FASD, which is preventable. That is higher than the prevalence of autism, which is currently at 1 per cent. Those numbers should alarm us all, but, tragically, they reflect Scotland's wider struggles with alcohol harm.

The reality is clear: the Scottish National Party Government's policies are failing to deliver the necessary preventative measures. The chief medical officer's advice is simple—people who are pregnant or who are trying to conceive should entirely avoid alcohol—but when 40 per cent of pregnancies are unplanned and alcohol misuse is a key contributor to risky sexual behaviour among younger people, the chief medical officer's guidance must be supported by robust public health measures.

The SNP's flagship policy of minimum unit pricing it is certainly not the answer. It has been paraded as a silver bullet for tackling alcohol harm, but it does nothing to directly address FASD or the broader issues of alcohol abuse, addiction and the long-term social harm that it causes.

The latest data suggest that alcohol-related deaths in Scotland have reached a high not seen since 2008. Where is the success in that? MUP has been in place for six years, but we still see no meaningful improvement in the conditions that lead to FASD. MUP also fails to tackle the root cause of many unplanned pregnancies or to ensure proper education about the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy. We cannot allow SNP members to pat themselves on the back while the very people they claim to protect suffer the consequences of weak and ineffective policy.

FASD does more than affect the child's health: it leads to higher rates of addiction, mental ill health, suicide and involvement with the judicial system. Without the right support structures in place, those children, through no fault of their own, are left with life-limiting challenges that could have been avoided.

The economic argument is also compelling. It is estimated that preventing just one case of FASD saves £1.4 million in a lifetime, yet the Government persists with a policy agenda that kicks the problem down the road, allowing future generations to bear the burden. We need practical, targeted interventions, better education, more robust public health campaigns and immediate support for families affected by FASD, not ideological quick fixes that do nothing to alleviate the strain on our NHS.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am interested to hear what solutions Dr Gulhane and his party may have worked out. A good part of his speech has been dedicated to detailing the problem and criticising the Government, but I wonder whether he would like to elaborate more on the solutions.

Sandesh Gulhane: One of the first things that we would like to do is to introduce a right to recovery bill that would give people the right to recover from alcohol addiction, along with that caused by drugs. That would be a first step. We need to put more money into prevention and treatment. That is key: we can treat people to get them out of the cycle that they are in.

The SNP has had 17 years in power and its record on alcohol harm speaks for itself. We have had enough of hollow promises because Scotland deserves better. FASD prevention and support should be at the forefront of our alcohol policy and it is time for this Government to face the consequences of its failure.

13:02

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate and thank my colleague Rona Mackay for bringing this important topic to the chamber. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month is a time to educate ourselves and our communities about the impact of alcohol consumption during pregnancy and to advocate for those who are affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Exposure to alcohol during pregnancy can lead to permanent harm for an unborn child and can have lifelong consequences, such as cognitive and behavioural issues and physical disabilities such as organ damage and poor growth. It is estimated that between 3 and 5 per cent of people in Scotland could be living with FASD, although

some suggest that figures could be even higher. It affects people throughout their lives, impacting their ability to engage in daily life if early support is not put in place.

Despite its prevalence, awareness and understanding of FASD remains low, so it is our responsibility to raise awareness and to educate ourselves and others. Key to that is understanding that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. The chief medical officer is clear that it is best to avoid alcohol during pregnancy, and even while planning to get pregnant, because that is crucial to protecting the health of future generations. Early identification and support are crucial and, with comprehensive support, individuals with FASD can prosper and can meet educational and life goals.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have a network of organisations that are available to support those with FASD and their families. The FASD hub Scotland is a perfect example. Funded by the Scottish Government, it offers peer support, training and one-to-one family support services whereby parents and carers will guide people through the process of getting a diagnosis and help them with accessing benefits, funding and additional support. Such organisations play a crucial role in increasing awareness and providing a safe space for parents and carers to share their journeys and experiences. As MSPs, it is our job to make sure that they are highlighted in Parliament and in our constituencies so that people are aware of the supports that are out there.

I agree with my colleague Rona Mackay that it is also important to increase awareness and training for practitioners to enable access to diagnostic and support services for those with FASD and their families. It is therefore welcome that, through the Scottish Government's funding, the fetal alcohol advisory support and training team has a national remit to provide and facilitate training, consultation and research. That will enhance the capacity, knowledge and confidence of Scotland's health and social care workforce in their work with those who are affected by FASD. I am also pleased to note that, as of last month, the University of Edinburgh offers Europe's first postgraduate certificate in FASD.

FASD awareness month is also about recognising the resilience and strength of those who live with FASD and their families. With the right support, they can flourish. Support networks are key to that, because they foster connections between families and provide a safe space for them to share experiences and advice. As we mark fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month, we must recommit our efforts to raise awareness throughout our communities and work

together to reduce the rates of FASD while continuing to advocate for the rights and needs of those who are affected. Together, we can create a country where individuals are—rightly—supported and empowered to live their best lives.

13:07

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Rona Mackay for her commitment to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and for bringing this important debate to the chamber to mark international FASD awareness month. As others have said, it is vital that the Parliament has an opportunity to talk about the issue, raise awareness and call for continued action to support interventions. As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to look at how we reduce the prevalence and impact of FASD in Scotland and support those who live with it.

As we have heard, it has been estimated that about 3.2 per cent of Scotland's young people live with FASD. That figure is stark when we consider that, as the motion states, it is the most common preventable neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland. The evidence from the University of Glasgow, which members have mentioned, suggests that the prevalence could be higher than we previously thought, with about 42 per cent of babies having been exposed to alcohol in pregnancy and 15 per cent showing signs of exposure to high and frequent consumption.

As has been stated, FASD is preventable, and the UK chief medical officers have made it clear that alcohol and pregnancy do not mix. They recommend that the safest approach for people who are pregnant or are planning a pregnancy is not to drink alcohol at all. That will keep the risks to the baby to a minimum. Drinking alcohol at any stage of pregnancy risks the development of a neurodevelopmental disorder, and it is important that people understand that.

However, I want to make two points in that regard. First, more than a quarter of women in the United Kingdom are unaware of that advice not to drink alcohol. Secondly, it is estimated that 45 per cent of pregnancies in the UK are unplanned. What do we do about that? How do we make sure that that information is available to young women who are planning a pregnancy and to those who do not know that they are pregnant?

Clearly, there is an important piece of work to be done to ensure that the messaging is clear for women throughout their life, so that they get that information. We have a responsibility to make sure that our pre-conception strategy is such that people get that information.

Another important point is that binge drinking—consuming lots of alcohol in a short period of

time—is thought to bring a particular risk of FASD. We know that, in Scotland, there is an element of binge drinking among women. We in the Parliament must use the opportunity of this debate to talk about the wider approach to an alcohol strategy for Scotland that seeks to change our problematic relationship with alcohol.

Alcohol policy needs to be a range of measures, formulated and implemented by the Government and other public bodies, that are designed to prevent, improve or treat the health and social problems that are associated with problematic alcohol use. Given past commitments from the Government and the minister, I hope that, in her response to the debate, she will discuss the public health measures on which we might be able to improve and move forward, and the pace at which we might do that.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I thank all colleagues for the discussion. We must seek to get the best support for those who live with FASD, and we must seek to improve diagnosis and support. However, prevention is key and, in Scotland, we know that we need to move forward with that. I thank all my colleagues for contributing.

13:11

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): September marks fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month, and I am grateful to my friend Rona Mackay for securing this important debate. Since 1999, 9 September has been international FASD day. The ninth day of the ninth month signifies that abstaining from alcohol for the nine months of pregnancy can help to ensure that babies will not be born with FASD.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is not the only outcome of drinking alcohol in pregnancy—doing so also increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth and sudden infant death syndrome. The figures from the Scottish FASD strategy group show that, on average, of pregnancies in which the baby is exposed to alcohol in Scotland, 15 per cent involve high and frequent consumption. The figures show that the United Kingdom experiences the fourth-highest prenatal alcohol exposure of anywhere in the world. In Scotland, around 3 to 5 per cent of the population is estimated to have FASD, in contrast to an estimated 0.8 per cent globally. That underscores the scale of the work that needs to be done.

We have heard from members across the chamber about the impact of FASD on individuals. That has been covered well, so I will not repeat the remarks that have been made. However, earlier in the session, I had the pleasure, as I am sure many colleagues had, of speaking to people

who have been diagnosed with FASD, when they held an exhibition in the Parliament. Many spoke of the stigma that they felt as a result of a health condition that was not of their own making. Some spoke passionately about how they used their experience to educate other people about the challenges that they face when it comes to their health and the challenges and barriers that affect them in relation to other services.

One issue that was highlighted was that people with FASD are often diagnosed with other neurodevelopmental conditions and therefore receive the wrong treatment and support. It is therefore important, as Rona Mackay said, that clinicians get the right training to appropriately diagnose those who present looking for help.

I take the opportunity to highlight some of the incredible work that is being done in my region to support those with FASD. The North Lanarkshire Alcohol and Drug Partnership provides face-to-face training for professionals and parents and carers, peer support so that people can share experience, and family events and meet-ups to support families and those who are diagnosed with FASD.

In Falkirk and across the Forth Valley NHS Board area, Scottish Families Affected by Drugs and Alcohol offers remarkable support to those who are affected by FASD conditions. The Forth Valley family support team schedules sessions that last around an hour. It travels across Forth Valley and frequently uses rooms in libraries, community centres and treatment services to meet family members, thereby taking support to those who need it. That is in addition to the work of an incredible array of third sector organisations and charities that work around the clock to deliver support in both health board areas that span the Central Scotland region and, indeed, more broadly across Scotland.

We must continue our efforts to prevent fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and to treat addiction issues with the urgency that they require. That is why we cannot forget that FASD often exacerbates existing forms of poverty and deprivation. As a result, we must work in tandem to continue to raise awareness of the risks of drinking during pregnancy, redouble our efforts to reduce the overall population's consumption of alcohol and ensure that people who are affected by FASD are identified and supported appropriately and adequately in a timely manner. That can happen only if we are able to ensure that the national neurodevelopmental assessment pathway is adequately resourced to allow early identification of and appropriate support for people with FASD.

I also believe that we must consider the lived experience of pregnant women and enhance

pathways for them to obtain support. Many challenges exist in our most deprived areas, which, along with a lack of awareness and understanding of FASD, are particularly problematic. We must ensure that our most vulnerable people receive an extensive range of support and assessment.

13:16

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, commend Rona Mackay for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

Colleagues have raised a multitude of important points. I want to raise one other matter on behalf of a constituent who has been in touch with me recently and on behalf of other constituents who have contacted me in the past on the same issue.

Other members have talked extensively and passionately about the support that is available to families and parents. Another issue that has come across my desk through my constituency casework has been the availability of support for adoptive parents who are raising children with FASD. That is a problem in my constituency, and I am sure that it will apply elsewhere. As a society, we want to encourage adoption and ensure that support for adoptive parents is available in the same way that it should be for other parents.

Either in her summing up or in written correspondence with me after the debate, perhaps the minister could give more insight into the availability of support for adoptive parents who are in the unique position of raising children with FASD and what support they are able to access. Perhaps we could engage in correspondence on how the situation could be enhanced and improved.

13:18

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank Rona Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber as part of international fetal alcohol spectrum disorder awareness month.

Like Gillian Mackay, earlier in the session I met and spoke with people who live with FASD, and I was very struck by what I heard. Ben Macpherson has just spoken about support for adoptive parents, and I had a conversation about exactly that issue. I will be happy to discuss the subject further with him.

The Scottish Government is committed to preventing the harm that is caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy and to supporting people who are impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I will outline our approach to

prevention, as well as the work that is on-going to improve the lives of people who live with FASD.

As other members have said, the chief medical officer's clear message on the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy remains, "No alcohol, no risk". That message features on the Ready Steady Baby! pregnancy advice web pages and on NHS Inform's website, where there is information on why women should avoid alcohol when they are pregnant or are trying to conceive. For some time, we have recognised the importance of pre-conception care to aid pregnancy planning and preparation, where that can significantly reduce avoidable harm, including alcohol.

As others have mentioned, the women's health plan, which was published in August 2021, contains an action on supporting pre-pregnancy care. As part of that commitment, NHS Inform launched information on pre-pregnancy health in October 2023, to bring together information and support for women and men to consider when planning a pregnancy. Our work is also focusing on ensuring that key messages, knowledge and awareness are embedded across the health system, connecting the public health outcomes that have the highest risk of poor outcomes for mother and baby with those that have the highest potential to improve short and longer-term health. That includes the risk of drinking alcohol during or when planning for pregnancy.

Improving pre-conception care requires a dual strategy that targets health improvement in both women and men when planning a pregnancy and in the general population of reproductive age. Last week, as Carol Mochan will recall, she, Dr Gulhane and I took part in a public health event at which this specific question was raised, and I have committed to extending that conversation and, indeed, am happy to continue it with Carol Mochan.

Pre-conception plays a key role in the early child development transformational change programme, which aims to reduce by 2030 the proportion of children reported as having developmental concerns at 27 to 30 months by a quarter. As the First Minister affirmed in his statement introducing the programme for government, addressing risks and problems at that stage can have positive impacts that last through to adulthood. It can support healthy development, prevent illness and ease future pressures on services.

The Scottish Government is determined to ensure that people living with FASD have the opportunity to live life on their own terms, properly supported when they need to be. We are committed to improving outcomes and opportunities for all neurodivergent people. As Rona Mackay and Carol Mochan have said, FASD is the most common preventable neurodivergent

condition; it is lifelong and can affect every area of a person's life, and we are working across Government on our neurodevelopmental policies to ensure that we are targeting the policies that impact most on people's lives.

In 2018, as has been mentioned, we published an alcohol framework setting out a commitment to increase awareness of FASD and to support improved diagnosis.

Gillian Mackay: Will the minister give way?

Jenni Minto: Yes.

Gillian Mackay: I am intervening partly to give the minister a minute to take a wee sip of water, but in the light of some of the other discussion that we have had during the debate, does the minister support greater education for clinicians and those working with young people to help identify FASD at the earliest possible opportunity and to raise awareness of some of the symptoms, so that we can see an end to those diagnosed with the wrong neurodevelopmental condition?

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

Jenni Minto: I thank Gillian Mackay for that incredibly helpful intervention.

We absolutely know how important it is to provide education and training on FASD and, indeed, to support families and individuals. That is why we fund two key organisations that have both been referenced in members' speeches.

Additionally, we have committed to introducing the learning, disability, autism and neurodiversity bill, which provides a real opportunity to ensure that the rights of neurodivergent people, including those with FASD, are respected and protected. The final consultation analysis report for the bill has now been published. With nearly 900 responses, the consultation demonstrated the bill's importance to many people and organisations across Scotland; indeed, it demonstrates the need for change. The programme for government for 2024-25 affirmed our commitment to continue to develop proposals for the LDAN bill and stated that we will publish draft provisions. The bill's proposals cover many different areas of life, including health and social care, justice and education.

In 2021, the Scottish Government published the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people, which sets out seven standards for service providers to ensure that children and young people who have neurodevelopmental profiles with support needs receive support that better meets those needs. Based on the getting it right for every child approach, the specification aims to ensure that children and families receive support and access

to services that meet their needs at the earliest opportunity. For many children and young people, such support is likely to be community based and should be quickly and easily accessible.

In that respect, I note the points that Ben Macpherson made about adoptive parents. I also want to highlight the comments that Marie McNair and Gillian Mackay made about organisations in their constituencies. I know that a network of such organisations is working throughout Scotland, and I thank them for the work that they do.

I hope that I have given some reassurance to everybody about the importance of this issue to the Scottish Government and that I have demonstrated the work that is on-going to prevent FASD and to support those with FASD to live their best lives. We are aware that more needs to be done in Scotland, including raising awareness of the issue, and in that respect, I am so grateful to Rona Mackay and everyone else who has spoken in the debate.

13:25

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio today is net zero and energy, and transport. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant questions. I am aware of quite a bit of interest in questions, so brevity in questions and responses would be appreciated.

ScotRail (Reduced Timetable)

1. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with ScotRail regarding the operation of a reduced train timetable. (S6O-03765)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland holds regular discussions with Scottish Rail Holdings and ScotRail Trains Ltd about a number of issues, including ScotRail's timetable. I am pleased that, like those in other rail unions, Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen members have voted to accept ScotRail's pay offer. ScotRail is expected to replace its current temporary timetable as soon as possible.

Marie McNair: I know that the cabinet secretary will share my and my constituents' relief that the dispute has now been settled and that our train drivers will be getting back to providing passengers with a fuller ScotRail timetable. Will she ensure that ScotRail circulates information about reinstated services as quickly as possible, so that the travelling public are aware of how Scotland's publicly owned railway will meet their needs?

Fiona Hyslop: I will. Obviously, ScotRail needs to do some initial planning to reintroduce the timetable. I will impress on ScotRail the desire of MSPs to understand that and to be communicated with.

I take the opportunity to remind members that I have written to every single member of the Parliament with information about their region and the new discounted fares that will start from Monday and will benefit their constituents. I ask them to help to publicise that and ScotRail's communication of the new discounted fares, as well as the new timetable when it is released.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): A Transport Focus survey shows that satisfaction

with the frequency of ScotRail trains is in the bottom half of levels across the United Kingdom. I hope that that will improve. The cabinet secretary says that she wants the timetable to be reinstated "as soon as possible". What does she mean by that? Can she be more specific?

Fiona Hyslop: In the next week or so.

Grangemouth (Just Transition Commission Report)

2. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Just Transition Commission's recent report on the future of Grangemouth. (S6O-03766)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The Scottish Government welcomes the Just Transition Commission's report on the future of the Grangemouth industrial cluster. The acting Cabinet Secretary for Energy and Net Zero wrote to the commission's co-chairs earlier this year to express that.

The Scottish Government considered those proposals in the drafting of the Grangemouth industrial just transition plan, which will be published for consultation in due course. I should note that some of the proposals are far reaching and will require consideration by a wider set of stakeholders regarding practical implementation, particularly across the Grangemouth future industry board. I look forward to further working with the JTC on how that can be achieved.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the minister for that reply and welcome the tone and content of what he has said. One of the key findings of the Just Transition Commission's report is that the people of Grangemouth want more than just "warm words". Will he elaborate on his response? The report stated that GFIB must have

"clear, actionable, measurable commitments from each party that go beyond 'business as usual'".

It emphasised that the credibility of the just transition plan for Grangemouth hinges on transparent accountability. Will the minister confirm that the published plan will include commitments, actions, timelines and deadlines?

Alasdair Allan: Yes—I confirm that it will. The member mentions some themes that came through in the report, which were that the plan must earn the trust of the workers, that it must be the first in a series of just transition plans for different parts of the Scottish economy and that a new intergenerational social contract is needed to ensure that Grangemouth feels the benefit, which must extend to the whole region.

Another point that I wish to make—I appreciate that the member realises this—is that that is all in addition to the more immediate interventions that

are taking place in and around Grangemouth, in consultation with the UK Government.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Our thoughts are with the workforce and their families during what is such a worrying time, and it is welcome that the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments have since announced a further £20 million, in addition to the £80 million joint-funded Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal. Will the minister say more about the plans for that funding and the opportunities that it will create?

Alasdair Allan: I echo David Torrance's concerns for the workforce and families at Grangemouth. We are supportive of the UK Government matching our long-standing commitment to Grangemouth through its recent announcement of £10 million of additional funding for the Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal. That releases £100 million of combined Government investment over the next 10 years, and it will enhance and protect Grangemouth's manufacturing and petrochemical cluster to ensure that it continues to be of strategic importance.

Projects such as the Grangemouth sustainable manufacturing campus will aid Grangemouth's transition to net zero, while the greener Grangemouth programme will deliver activity that is focused on regeneration and community wealth building, alongside skills investment. We are working alongside the UK Government, which has yet to outline the specific focus of its additional funding. We will continue to press it to support fuel security and sustainability.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The Just Transition Commission's report advised that the process of developing just transition plans for other industrial sites that are linked to Grangemouth, such as Mossmorran, should begin urgently. I will be hosting a worker-led summit with unions, operators and decision makers in December to start a meaningful conversation on the development of a worker-led just transition plan for Mossmorran. I invite the minister and the cabinet secretary to join me and all those stakeholders in a vital conversation at the summit later this year.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the member for his contribution and his helpful point about Mossmorran. The Government is very much cognisant of the role of Mossmorran and its need to have its own just transition plan and its own specific engagement. That engagement is already under way.

Onshore Wind Turbines (Review of Noise Guidance)

3. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests regarding onshore wind.

To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the four nations steering group on the review of noise guidance for onshore wind turbines as it applies to Scotland. (S6O-03767)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): Scottish Government officials continue to engage on a regular basis in the United Kingdom Government-led process to update the ETSU-R-97 noise guidance, with the latest engagement having been in August this year.

Alexander Burnett: Regarding the review of the ETSU-R-97 noise guidance, my constituent asked the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero how authorities should act with regard to evidence that will form part of that review when determining applications before the review process is complete. The UK Government's response made it clear that decision makers can consider other relevant evidence and may depart from existing policy and guidance if there is a rational justification for doing so. Will the acting cabinet secretary confirm today that she will recognise the recommendations in the WSP report and act accordingly in making determinations?

Gillian Martin: Of course, any noise complaints can be reported to the relevant local authority and can be investigated under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. There are also provisions under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, and any breach of consent conditions on noise can be investigated under that act. However, I will take on board Mr Burnett's comments.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): We clearly need to work alongside communities to protect our natural environment, as well as driving forward decarbonisation and green economic growth. If Scotland and the UK are to comply with the independent Climate Change Committee's advice that electricity supply from onshore wind must double by 2030 to meet net zero targets, how does the Scottish Government seek to strike the correct balance on that vital endeavour?

Gillian Martin: As Mr Doris says, Scotland's potential for renewable energy generation is one of our greatest environmental and economic opportunities. In the recent programme for government, we set out our ambition to double renewable electricity capacity, with actions to deliver on our clean energy pipeline and its many benefits. As part of our just transition, we will prioritise community benefits, skills, supply chains,

energy efficiency and decarbonisation projects. I was pleased recently to launch, alongside the Deputy First Minister, the green industrial strategy, which focuses specifically on seizing the economic opportunities of the global transition to net zero.

Energy Price Cap

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding action to address the impact in Scotland of the rising energy price cap, which will increase by 10 per cent in October. (S6O-03768)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The news that energy prices are to rise by 10 per cent next month is of deep concern. Following its extremely disappointing cut to the winter fuel payment, we encourage the new UK Government to do more to increase take-up of pension credit and we will engage with it again ahead of the budget. Meanwhile, we are forming a working group with key energy suppliers, which is aimed at co-designing a social energy tariff that would provide more affordable energy tariffs to those who are in most need. We continue to urge the UK Government to introduce such a mechanism.

Clare Adamson: I am very concerned for my constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw, many of whom are the most vulnerable customers, who suffer from higher tariffs and practices that penalise the most vulnerable in our constituencies, such as debt being put on the meters. I welcome the working group and look forward to further detail on it. Will the minister join me in reminding people to submit or photograph their meter readings before 1 October, so that they will not be unduly penalised by “mistakes” from fuel companies?

Gillian Martin: I am happy to echo the important reminder that Clare Adamson has just given about meter readings and to take on board the other points that she has made. The increased bills demonstrate why the UK Government must urgently agree to deliver a social tariff. We are already committed to working with the UK Government to make that a reality.

The core purpose of our working group is to enable industry and Government to develop a shared understanding, beyond the broad principles of how to deliver this crucial policy. Clare Adamson can join me in saying to anyone who has any pressing concerns about their energy bill that help is available if they contact the Scottish Government-funded Advice Direct Scotland.

Ports (Infrastructure Upgrading)

5. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its policy is on upgrading the infrastructure of ports. (S6O-03769)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We recognise how crucial the Scottish ports sector is to our economy and in supporting lifeline ferry services. Scottish ports are mostly independent statutory bodies and, hence, are deemed independent commercial entities. The Scottish Government has no role in their day-to-day operations or in business decisions, such as the upgrading of infrastructure.

Exceptionally, the Scottish Government provides grants towards significant upgrades at ports that ferry services under the Clyde and Hebrides and Northern Isles contracts use, which ensures that those ports remain safe and operable for contracted ferry services, can accommodate increasing traffic and become more accessible to a range of vessels.

Annabelle Ewing: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the on-going discussions about the re-establishment of a freight and passenger ferry from the port of Rosyth to Dunkirk, which is the third-largest port in France. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet representatives of DFDS Seaways to discuss the current status of that exciting project? In light of that project, will she consider what upgrades to port infrastructure might be required—leaving to one side who would be doing them—in order to boost exports and tourism through direct maritime links with the European Union?

Fiona Hyslop: I am aware of the proposal to explore the viability of a Rosyth to Dunkirk ferry service, and I have already met individuals who are promoting it. Transport Scotland officials have continued that dialogue. If the Scottish Government can assist with any new specific developments, a meeting might be appropriate.

Of course, Forth Ports is a private port operator, and any decision to invest in its infrastructure is for it to make, in liaison with its commercial shipping partners. I suggest including DFDS in scoping what would be required for business and exports, with consideration of the potential return on investment from which it would benefit.

The Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government have supported Forth Ports through the creation of the Forth green freeport site, which includes Rosyth. That support includes seed capital funding and the ability for businesses located within the tax site to access a package of devolved and reserved tax incentives, which should assist the port of Rosyth in continuing to be an attractive place for any future developments, such as those in relation to DFDS.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): It has been seven months since I first raised the issue of the Irish berth at Ardrossan harbour going offline for safety reasons. That is the principal reason why the MV Alfred is now operating out of Troon and not out of Ardrossan, as it should be. It has been seven years since the Scottish National Party Government promised action on the port infrastructure at Ardrossan—seven whole years, and a decision has yet to be made. My question is simple: when will a decision be made on the vital upgrade to Ardrossan harbour? By when, I mean by which date.

Fiona Hyslop: I know that the member wants a date—I would like a date—but we need to ensure that we have a robust business plan that addresses critical legal and financial issues, which have changed recently, and that are not the responsibility of the Scottish Government. Jamie Greene referred to the Irish berth. He will also know—as I referred to it in my initial answer to Annabelle Ewing—that ports are, by and large, privately owned and are independent. Peel Ports has the responsibility for Ardrossan harbour and for keeping the Irish berth in the state that it is required to be. That is a material factor in anticipating what work needs to be done. Peel Ports is part of the task force and is taking part in the discussions. The solution to the situation at Ardrossan harbour needs to be one that can be depended on. That will require the co-operation of the current partners. Should the situation change any time soon, I will let Jamie Greene know. However, I appreciate his frustration, which I, as the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, share.

Energy Price Cap (Heat Networks)

6. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the implementation of its heat in buildings strategy, what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government on consumer protection, in the light of reported concerns that customers currently using heat networks are not protected by the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets' price cap. (S6O-03770)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Although heat networks are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, consumer protection remains a reserved matter and, therefore, we are reliant on the UK Government enacting the consumer protection provisions that are contained in the Energy Act 2023. We await the new UK Government's next steps on that. The Scottish Government continues to work closely with the UK and Welsh Governments and Ofgem on the implementation of consumer standards, and is participating in a quadripartite group that is overseeing the implementation of the legislation.

Ben Macpherson: I welcome the Scottish Government's proactive work on that. Constituents have written to me and to other MSPs explaining that they are currently facing increases of upwards of 500 per cent in their district heating costs by their property factors. The lack of consumer protection in that area leaves customers vulnerable to market forces. My constituents are worried about their ability to pay their energy bills this winter. Sadly, as has been set out, the Parliament lacks the legislative power to change energy policy in that area. Considering that the Scottish Parliament is unable to take that action, will the Scottish Government continue to press the UK Government to take action as soon as possible? Can any pressure be applied to property factors to engage with parliamentarians so that, together, we can help our constituents who are affected?

Alasdair Allan: I hear Ben Macpherson's concerns, and I think that I may know the area of Edinburgh that he is referring to. As he has mentioned, the Parliament lacks the legislative power to change energy policy in that respect. It is disappointing that the UK Government has not taken quicker action to protect consumers who are reliant on heat networks for heating and hot water. I will raise the issue as a matter of urgency with my counterparts in the UK Government, and will certainly correspond with the member on some of the issues that he raises.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Mr Macpherson raises important points about consumer protection in relation to the implementation of the Scottish Government's heat and buildings strategy. Industry leaders have expressed concerns that the current differing patchwork of quality assurance and consumer protection schemes makes it unclear what accreditation is needed for Government energy efficiency funding. Will the Government introduce mandatory quality assurance accreditation in the proposed heat in buildings bill, and will sufficient time be allowed in order to allow industry to adjust and obtain those accreditations?

Alasdair Allan: The member would not expect me to pre-empt any announcement about what might be in future legislation in any detail. However, we are continuing to implement the Heat Networks (Scotland) Act 2021, and we have passed the Heat Networks (Heat Network Zones and Building Assessment Reports) (Scotland) Regulations 2023, which will help local authorities and the Scottish Government to identify opportunities for heat network developments across Scotland. We will shortly consult on proposals to introduce a proportionate licensing and consenting system for Scotland, which I hope will address some of the issues that the member raises.

Proposed Heat in Buildings Bill

7. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what financial impact its proposed heat in buildings bill will have on home owners. (S6O-03771)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): This year's programme for government committed to the introduction of a heat in buildings bill, which will be accompanied by a financial memorandum and all other relevant impact assessments. We intend that to be deliverable and affordable for households and businesses. We continue to offer the most generous package of funding in the United Kingdom for households to transition to clean heating, with various schemes to support those who have difficulty in paying their fuel bills. However, we also need action from the new UK Government to rebalance gas and electricity prices, which is an essential part of making the transition more affordable.

Sue Webber: The reality is that for thousands of Victorian tenements in densely populated parts of our cities, such as Leith and Partick, and in cottages and homes across the country, the costs of meeting the standards that are outlined in the bill are not deliverable or affordable; they are of a scale that neither the individual nor the Scottish Government can ever dream of affording. Owners could, in effect, be blocked from selling their homes, which would have a catastrophic impact on the property market and on the lives of those who would be trapped in homes that they cannot sell.

Does the minister accept that the proposal would aggravate Scotland's housing crisis? Will he commit to introducing an appropriate exemption to the proposed scheme?

Alasdair Allan: I thank the member for the points that she makes. She rightly says that not all costs that are associated with our transition to a clean future can ever be met entirely by Government. However, I would add that the member and her party often come to the Parliament asking what more Scotland, and our Government, can do to meet our ambitious targets on decarbonising the country. A total of 20 per cent of the carbon emissions from Scotland come from houses, so I hope that she will not oppose every measure that is brought to Parliament to try to address the problem.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The proposed heat in buildings bill will be vital in helping us to meet our climate goals, providing energy-efficient insulation solutions and clean, green heat. Can the minister say any more about what assessment the Scottish Government has

made of how that will reduce emissions and heating bills?

Alasdair Allan: Our recent consultation highlighted the potential of a switch to clean heating and more energy efficient homes to reduce our exposure to the spikes in fossil fuel prices that have driven the recent surge in energy costs. Any bill that we bring forward will be accompanied by a financial memorandum and all other relevant impact assessments, which will consider those issues and impacts in more detail.

Green Hydrogen Sector

8. **Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its efforts to develop a world-leading green hydrogen sector. (S6O-03772)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Hydrogen is a key part of our net zero journey, and we remain committed to developing a world-leading green hydrogen sector in Scotland. We continue to engage with hydrogen projects across Scotland, working with them to develop their production, offtake and export capabilities. The levers that are available to the United Kingdom Government, in particular with regard to production, regulation and trade, are critical to ensuring that Scottish companies benefit from domestic and global market opportunities. We continue to work with UK counterparts to ensure that the Scottish hydrogen sector is best positioned to take forward that critical work to support meeting our net zero targets.

Gordon MacDonald: Given that a successful transition to a green hydrogen economy would be transformative in the race to net zero, does the minister agree that, in order to meet the costs of that transition, the Labour Government must reverse its abandonment of the £28 billion green investment pledge and step up to meet its ambitions for the sector?

Alasdair Allan: In Scotland, we are creating the right conditions to realise the opportunities that the just transition to net zero presents for our workers and for our economy. Our "Green Industrial Strategy", which was published earlier this month, sets out how we are creating an environment that encourages such investment, including in hydrogen. As the member suggests, we are limited in the fiscal levers that we are able to deploy to support those ambitions in Scotland, and we would absolutely welcome further investment by the UK Government.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): What plans are there to use hydrogen in the rail network?

Alasdair Allan: I am not in a position to talk in detail about future legislation, nor am I in a position to talk knowledgeably about the issue that the member raises, but I will correspond with him.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on net zero, energy and transport. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change positions.

Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am grateful for the opportunity to provide an update to members on the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion in Edinburgh.

Last week, NHS Lothian announced that, from late October, the eye pavilion will be vacated for a period of around six months. That is to allow for critical maintenance to be carried out and for subsequent recommissioning of the site.

It is clear that the closure will cause disruption to patients and to staff, and I understand that both groups are concerned about the impact on arrangements for providing care and on waiting times. I am sorry for the worry that it will cause for many, so I will start by being clear that my priorities, and those of NHS Lothian, are to ensure safety and, to the fullest extent possible, to minimise disruption.

In my statement today, I will provide further information on the critical maintenance that will be carried out at the eye pavilion, and on the planning for the patient appointments that need to be rearranged as a consequence. I hope that that will provide assurance to all concerned that the matter is being addressed with due care and speed. I will also speak to the future and to the need for service and financial sustainability, as well as reform. We know that change is needed and we must do things differently.

First, I will briefly explain the issue that has led to the temporary closure of the eye pavilion. Two copper waste pipe stacks require to be replaced, and it is critical that that is done quickly to prevent damage that would require more significant remedial works and cause greater disruption. That is why the hospital is being vacated at pace, and NHS Lothian plans to hand the building over to contractors on 25 October.

The current estimate from NHS Lothian of the expected duration of the closure is six months. That is an estimate, and the timeframe and programme of works are being developed. That will be kept under review ahead of and during the works and recommissioning.

With regard to what will happen during the period of closure and why it takes time, the site requires to be decanted before remedial works

can be undertaken, and recommissioning is required before reopening. Decanting the site is a complex process and includes the moving of equipment as well as the relocation of clinics.

Unfortunately, during surveys to assess the required work, it has been identified that one of the waste pipes is located within a cavity that contains asbestos. That adds to the complexity and the timeline of the remedial works. Safe removal of the asbestos material is essential ahead of the pipework replacement, for the safety of those who are carrying out the work and those who use the site. Once the remedial works are complete, a process of recommissioning is required to provide assurance that the site is fully operational and to ensure safety ahead of reopening.

During the coming weeks and months, my officials and I will stay in close contact with NHS Lothian to seek the necessary assurances around progress. As I have said, patient safety is paramount and, following my visit to the eye pavilion this morning, along with Miles Briggs, Sarah Boyack and Daniel Johnson, I am assured that the board is doing everything possible to minimise disruption and potential harm to patients.

NHS Lothian is looking at all possible options across its estate to maximise capacity for ophthalmology patients. After hearing directly from patients at a previous meeting on the issue, I have also sought assurance that there will be minimal travel for patients with the most profound needs. That is a critical issue that patients have raised with me.

The vast majority of patients whose appointments are scheduled before Friday 25 October will be unaffected, and the small number of patients who are affected will be contacted by NHS Lothian at least two weeks prior to their appointment. Patients who are booked for appointments from Monday 28 October will be contacted with changes to their appointments, and new patients will be given an alternative location in their booking letter.

While NHS Lothian is still finalising all of the details of its plans, I have heard from the board that communication with patients, MSPs, local partners and Government is and will be on-going. I know that NHS Lothian also has a planned meeting on 4 October with all Lothian MSPs, when it will share more detail following the conclusion of its final plan. The board is also working closely with staff and unions in relation to those staff who will be displaced, in order to manage their concerns.

I now turn to the future of eye care services. It is important to recognise that replacement of the eye pavilion was included as part of the national treatment centre programme, which was intended

to provide capacity for all of Scotland. As we look ahead, we must continue to plan on the basis of need and available resources across the whole of Scotland. The landscape has changed significantly since the national treatment centre programme started, not least as a result of Covid, Brexit and soaring construction costs. As we have repeatedly made clear, the financial climate is extremely challenging across both the revenue and capital budgets.

We have also made clear that health service reform is essential for operational and financial sustainability. Our actions must enable NHS Scotland to maximise capacity, build greater resilience and deliver reductions in the number of patients who have waited too long for treatment. In that context, all spending—even that previously committed—must be carefully considered so that it is directed where it will have the greatest impact.

We know that the national health service estate is ageing and that it is not affordable to replace everything as quickly as we might like to—a position that is not unique to Scotland. We must make better use of our existing resources to support reform and improvement and we must consider where strategic investment across our existing estate will provide better value than replacement. We must also consider how we can improve through service redesign to ensure that we have a resilient service for the future.

We are working with all health boards, including NHS Lothian, to develop a whole-system infrastructure plan. That will consider health infrastructure needs for the whole of Scotland, to support continued safe operation of existing facilities and to inform longer-term investment priorities. As I have made clear, a key part of our consideration must be how existing resources can be better utilised to provide the required capacity.

We must also retain focus on preventing the need for hospital treatment in the first place. That means both investing in our existing estate and reducing pressure on that estate by delivering services in a different way. For eye care services, that includes consideration of how we better utilise capacity at existing treatment centres. A key part of that is ensuring that more people are treated in a community setting, where that is clinically appropriate. We know that treatment closer to home is of benefit to patients, with the potential to improve patient experience and overall health outcomes, and making better use of community services frees up acute capacity for more complex cases.

The community optometry sector already provides a first-port-of-call service to patients with eye problems. That is enabled by Scotland being the only nation in the United Kingdom to provide free universal NHS eye examinations—a policy

that the Government is committed to maintaining. That approach has been really successful in supporting many patients to be managed within the community, closer to home, instead of needing to be referred to hospital or to be seen by a general practitioner.

However, the community optometry sector has the capacity and capability to do much more. An example is the new community glaucoma service, which moves lower-risk patients who would traditionally be seen in a hospital setting to available capacity in the community optometry sector, thereby freeing up hospital capacity for patients with the most sight-threatening conditions. The service is being rolled out nationally and will deliver the capacity and technology for an estimated 20,000 patients to receive their care closer to home.

We are also investing in our future optometry workforce through Scotland's new UK-leading masters optometry undergraduate degree. That will, among other things, enable students to graduate as independent prescribing optometrists, and it will help to build additional capacity to support managing more patients in the community instead of their being referred to hospital.

The course has just launched at Glasgow Caledonian University, and the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health and the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans visited the university on Tuesday to meet the new students and teaching staff. The Government looks forward to the University of the Highlands and Islands launching a similar course next year.

I understand that members and their constituents are extremely concerned by the announcement that the eye pavilion will close for a period of time. I share that concern, so let me reaffirm that my priority, and NHS Lothian's priority, is to limit disruption and avoid harm, as well as to ensure that eye care appointments that would have taken place at the eye pavilion go ahead despite the temporary closure.

I also know that many are concerned about the future of the eye pavilion and will be disappointed that I have not been able to confirm its replacement in my statement today. I give my commitment that we will continue to look ahead to how eye care services can be delivered most effectively, with a clear focus on improved services and reduced waiting times.

We must be open to all possibilities on how that can be achieved, including how we make better use of existing services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow

about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now if they have not already done so.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance sight of his statement and for the time that he gave to staff, patients and elected members on a visit to the eye pavilion this morning.

As the cabinet secretary heard directly from clinicians then, the closure of the hospital and the significant disruption to the service have the potential to cause harm to patients in Lothian. We are at this point because of a failure to deliver a new eye hospital for Lothian over the past decade. There has been a failure of leadership by Scottish National Party ministers to plan for and deliver the growing health services that we need in Lothian.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that there is real concern among patients and staff that this might be just the start of a much longer period of closure of the hospital. We will not know that until work starts to be undertaken. It is now critical, therefore, that we see a commitment from SNP ministers to fast-track the funding and construction of a new replacement eye hospital.

I have two questions for the cabinet secretary. First, will he give a commitment that the Scottish Government will help to cover the significant costs that NHS Lothian will face when the services are redistributed across the NHS estate? Secondly, after today's visit, does he fully accept that we need a new eye hospital to be built in Lothian?

Neil Gray: I thank Miles Briggs for his on-going interest in the issue and the representation that he and others in the chamber are providing on it to their constituents, who I was able to hear directly from at a previous meeting in the Parliament, as well as this morning at the eye pavilion.

At the outset, I stress that everything that NHS Lothian is doing with regard to providing the contingency arrangements during the temporary closure is about ensuring that there is the least disruption possible to patients and reducing the risk of harm. We heard that this morning.

I recognise the increased financial pressure that the closure puts on NHS Lothian, and discussions that directly reference the question of how we can support NHS Lothian are on-going.

With regard to the building of a new eye pavilion, Miles Briggs is well aware of the capital programme pause that is under way in Government and the fact that an infrastructure review is on-going. That will be determined based on the outcomes of both the UK budget at the end of October and the infrastructure review that is

under way across the Scottish Government. I cannot give any greater commitment than that at this stage.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for the advance sight of his statement, and for the ability to meet senior staff and colleagues and members of keep Edinburgh eye pavilion—KEEP—at the eye pavilion this morning.

Let us be clear that, although the eye pavilion has been deemed not fit for purpose for a decade, this week's announcement will still have been a huge shock to patients and deeply worrying to staff.

Can the cabinet secretary give us a guarantee today that the eye pavilion will reopen in six months and that its closure will be an interim measure, so that people do not have to worry about access to the vital services that will protect and save their sight when they need it? Will he also commit to updating Parliament in the coming months and in six months' time, so that we are kept informed and can keep our constituents informed?

Will he also agree in principle on the importance of the need for a new eye pavilion? Notwithstanding the challenges that he has identified and the importance of the work on prevention, on which I totally agree, patients and staff urgently need and deserve a new facility that is safe and modern and meets everyone's needs, whether it is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Sarah Boyack: If the cabinet secretary could answer those questions, I would be grateful.

Neil Gray: I thank Sarah Boyack for her interaction on and long-standing interest in the issue. On her question around the closure being a temporary measure, it is absolutely NHS Lothian's intention to see the eye pavilion reopened and for that to be done within the six-month timeframe. This morning, we heard about some of the risks to that timing because of the uncertainty around some of the works, but I intend to keep a close eye on that.

That links to Sarah Boyack's second question, which is about keeping MSPs and their constituents informed. There is a meeting of all Lothian MSPs with NHS Lothian on 4 October. It is my intention to keep close to the issue and to provide updates from the Government perspective. I commit to keeping colleagues updated as soon as I hear anything further.

I have already set out to Miles Briggs as much as I can on the future for the eye pavilion, but I accept and agree with the point about the

importance of prevention. The future of the eye pavilion will be determined in part by the outcome of the UK budget and in part by the infrastructure review that is going on across the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is, understandably, considerable interest in asking questions. I intend to allow everybody who has requested a question to pose their question, but I will need co-operation in terms of the brevity of those questions and, indeed, the responses.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Having an eye hospital close to people, especially in emergencies, is a huge part of the issue, especially given the significant population growth in the Lothians. The cabinet secretary has sought assurance and, thankfully, has been assured that there will be minimal travel for those patients with the most needs who will be affected. What support will the Scottish Government provide to patients in NHS Lothian who will have to travel further for medical appointments?

Neil Gray: I thank Ben Macpherson for his interest in the issue, for his questions and for his engagement on a cross-party basis. As I have set out, and as we heard this morning, it is NHS Lothian's intention for patients—in particular, the emergency patients to whom Ben Macpherson referred—to be kept as close as possible to existing services. Ben Macpherson and other Lothians colleagues will hear an update on that at the meeting with the board on 4 October.

It is NHS Lothian's aim to see and treat as many patients as possible close to the city and the surrounding Lothian hospitals. If patients need to travel to a hospital outside NHS Lothian for treatment, and if they meet the assessment criteria, they are entitled to reimbursement of travel expenses or ambulance transport to help them to attend an appointment. However, having heard, at the meeting at which Mr Macpherson was present, the importance that is placed on minimising travel for patients with a significant eye condition, I have stressed to NHS Lothian the importance of keeping treatment as local as possible.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP.

This is a minimum six-month halt on activity at the Edinburgh eye pavilion. I fear that the cost of remediation will spiral, and it is clear that there is no plan for where to undertake procedures that require laminar flow. On average, over the past five years, 1,629 cataract procedures and 120 emergency eye procedures were carried out at the pavilion every six months. Where exactly will all those operations be carried out during closure?

Will the cabinet secretary guarantee to maintain the number of procedures during the closure period and that patient eye health will not be threatened?

Neil Gray: Sandesh Gulhane is right to reference the risk to the capacity that has been provided by the eye pavilion. I cannot give a guarantee that capacity will not be undermined because of the temporary closure of the eye pavilion. However, NHS Lothian is doing everything possible to maximise capacity not just in the Lothians but further afield to ensure that people can get access to the treatment that they need.

Sandesh Gulhane referenced the high level of sanitation that is required at theatre level for some procedures, which we heard about this morning. NHS Lothian is exploring all options to ensure that that is possible within the Lothians.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Asbestos is well recognised as one of the most dangerous substances still to be found in buildings up and down the country, including in the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion. Does the cabinet secretary agree that closure is the best course of action to ensure patient safety while plumbing system remediation work is carried out urgently to remove the risk of asbestos in the hospital?

Neil Gray: I do not underestimate the anxiety that will be felt by Gordon MacDonald's constituents or those of other Lothians representatives around the chamber. That is why it is important for NHS Lothian to move quickly and, on Sandesh Gulhane's question, to provide reassurances on maximising capacity. I agree that closure is the correct course of action, and I support NHS Lothian's plans to provide services elsewhere while rectification works are undertaken, exactly because of the points that Gordon MacDonald raises.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for acknowledging the points that were made this morning about the fact that the need to travel and the loss of co-location of acute and emergency treatment would cause harm, which would result in preventable loss of sight. How will that be monitored and measured? Secondly, if there is such a risk with the interim arrangements, surely that makes the case for the need for a replacement for the eye pavilion, so that co-location of those facilities continues into the future.

Neil Gray: Daniel Johnson makes a fair point, which underpins the decisions that have previously been taken in relation to looking at a replacement for the eye pavilion. I am not questioning that. What I am saying is that the future infrastructure plans for the health service

are dependent on the wider Government infrastructure review and the capital that will become available off the back of the UK budget, the implications of which Daniel Johnson will understand.

On the question about how the impact of the loss of co-location will be monitored, clinicians have an important role to play in that regard, as does NHS Lothian, and I expect to be kept updated on that.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Given that we have an increasingly ageing population and that we expect that more ophthalmic procedures will need to be carried out in the future, including at the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion, will the cabinet secretary say more about the action that is being taken to ensure future resilience in the provision of specialist ophthalmic staff, including at the site, through the recruitment of ophthalmology nurse specialists and consultants?

Neil Gray: It is critically important that we ensure that we look after the interests of staff as well as patients in the process; that was one of the areas that we discussed this morning.

A recent workforce review that was conducted by the national eye care workstream identified that an adequate number of ophthalmology consultants are in post to support patient care in NHS Lothian. Future proofing the service by upskilling additional non-medical staff and through the use of ophthalmic imaging equipment will enable more patients to be reviewed in a sustainable manner. There are a range of areas of intervention on which I can write to Emma Harper with more information to confirm our support in that endeavour.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for coming to the chamber to give us an update. It is clearly a frustrating situation for the board, for medics and for patients to be working in a building that has been unfit for purpose for 10 years. Keeping that building going will get more costly and will lead to more disruption.

The cabinet secretary has not set out a vision for the future of the eye pavilion. He has said that the Scottish Government will review the building as part of a whole infrastructure plan for the NHS. Will he please tell us when we will see that infrastructure plan, so that we can understand what the future of eye services in Lothian is?

Neil Gray: The frustrations that Lorna Slater has outlined, which are felt by patients, by staff and by others, are shared by me. The outcome of the infrastructure review will come after the budget process.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The closure of the eye pavilion will come as a bitter blow to campaigners, especially the keep Edinburgh eye pavilion campaign group and the Corstorphine connect sight loss group, which operate out of my constituency, but it represents vindication that the hospital has not been fit for purpose for some time.

I am concerned by the discovery of asbestos. We know that, where it is found in one part of a building, it is usually found in other parts, too. Is the health board aware of the full extent of the use of asbestos in the building? If not, is it looking to ascertain where else it might be? If it finds more asbestos, will that lead to a longer closure?

Neil Gray: The period of closure has some contingency built into it, based on what might be found when works begin. However, as I set out in my statement, there will have to be some flexibility. I hope that the eye pavilion will reopen before the six-month period elapses, but, depending on what happens as the works get under way, there will need to be some flexibility in relation to the term of the closure.

As a result of the identification of asbestos, there are obviously safety parameters that need to be explored, and that has been built into the current trajectories for the length of time that the process will take.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I understand that, in order to provide as much certainty as possible in relation to the Scottish Government's investment plans, we are awaiting confirmation of the capital allocations from the new Labour UK Government. What conversations have been held with the UK Government to that end, and what solutions have been offered?

Neil Gray: The First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government have met the Chancellor of the Exchequer on a number of occasions, and they have highlighted that the expected real-terms cuts to our capital funding, which are worth about £1.3 billion, are significantly impacting our ability to fund vital infrastructure projects, deliver on our priorities and provide the certainty that Mr Coffey referred to in his question, including in relation to investment in maintaining high-quality public services. We are keen to work with the UK Government to ensure that the budget on 30 October provides us with the capital budget that we need to achieve net zero, maintain high-quality public infrastructure and see economic benefits as a result.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Earlier this week, MSPs were told in a briefing that eye pavilion services would be accommodated in facilities across NHS Lothian. The eye pavilion sees

around 1,500 patients a week, with an average of 152 out-patient clinics a week, using 40 consultation rooms every day. Patients and clinicians will now be scattered across the city and I can only imagine the chaos and confusion that that will cause, all of which comes before we take into account the devastating impact on clinical care.

For months, I have been asking NHS Lothian for a back-up plan. Will the cabinet secretary finally give patients and staff the assurance that alternative and purposeful options are being arranged outside the existing NHS Lothian estate, whether that be in central office space, additional capacity in private opticians, or in hospitals and clinics?

Neil Gray: NHS Lothian is looking to ensure that the disruption and co-location issues that have been identified by members across the chamber are minimised as far as possible. The board will set out finalised plans to Lothian MSPs at a meeting on 4 October, when Sue Webber will be able to hear more detail about plans to ensure that that takes place.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I recognise that the Scottish Government gave our front-line health boards a real-terms increase that has seen the budget for NHS Lothian increase by £80.2 million this year. Will the cabinet secretary explain how he will look to protect and increase NHS funding where possible, despite an almost 10 per cent real-terms cut in the Scottish Government's capital funding between now and 2027-28 as a result of financial mismanagement in Westminster?

Neil Gray: As Collette Stevenson said, a real-terms uplift for the health portfolio was prioritised for the 2024-25 Scottish budget. I recognise that pressures continue even with that real-terms increase for health boards—including Lothian—and that those pressures are driven by demand.

In contrast to our position, documents published as part of the UK spring budget set out a real-terms 0.2 per cent resource reduction for the Department of Health and Social Care and the UK capital budget is expected to reduce in real terms over the medium term. As members are well aware, those spending decisions affect funding here in Scotland. Ahead of the UK budget next month, I urge the UK Government to reflect on Lord Darzi's findings and to deliver on previous calls from this Government and from organisations such as the International Monetary Fund to prioritise investment in infrastructure and public services.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): A constituent who had an appointment for November told me that that appointment was cancelled in

August, with an explanation that a new booking system would be operated at the eye pavilion. Is it just a coincidence that that coincides with the closure?

Neil Gray: Without knowing the details of the case that Martin Whitfield raises, I can say with some confidence that that is a coincidence, because the closure has been announced relatively recently. If he would like to write to me with the details, I would be more than happy to follow that up with NHS Lothian.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Following on from that question, will the cabinet secretary tell us when NHS Lothian made its decision and when the board informed him of that decision?

Neil Gray: I will write to Jeremy Balfour to give him the exact date and time when I was informed, but it was around the same time as the public: I was given, I think, an additional day's notice. I would be happy to provide Jeremy Balfour with that information in writing.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): This news is deeply disappointing. We have known for years that the eye pavilion was not fit for purpose but patients will now face uncertainty, with rearranged appointments in unfamiliar places. The eye pavilion provides specialist care. If a patient experiences an emergency with their eye condition, the accident and emergency department at Edinburgh royal infirmary may not be able to meet their needs. Will the cabinet secretary say where patients will now be sent for urgent care?

Neil Gray: I recognise the concern that Foysoyl Choudhury highlights, as it was discussed this morning at the meeting at the eye pavilion that his colleagues attended. NHS Lothian is also acutely concerned about ensuring that travel and disruption are minimised for patients who are in need of urgent care in particular, as he sets out. The final details of where people will receive those services will be set out at the meeting on 4 October with NHS Lothian and Lothian MSPs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow the front benches to change.

Ukraine

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-14655, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on Scotland stands with Ukraine. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): It has been more than two and a half years since Russia illegally and without provocation initiated a full-scale invasion of our democratic ally Ukraine. A war that those in the Kremlin thought would take days endures as Ukraine continues to fight bravely for its sovereignty, its people and democracy. I will take a moment to reflect on the journeys of the millions of people who have been forced to leave behind all that is familiar to them—their homes, schools, jobs and families—to flee the devastation of Russian aggression.

Scotland has welcomed thousands of displaced families who have travelled across Europe under the most challenging of circumstances. Some of them have witnessed the worst atrocities and many understandably miss and are deeply concerned for those back home but, in the face of a humanitarian crisis, they made those difficult choices to deliver their families to safety.

I feel a profound sense of sadness to think that we are now moving towards a third year of the conflict—another year in which families will be separated and the lives of innocent people will be turned upside down. Therefore, it is the right time for the Parliament to come together once again in defiance of aggression to say that Scotland stands with Ukraine.

We stand with each other and with every person who has sought refuge in our country from wars and persecution from across the world. I know that the people of Scotland agree. For centuries, we have been known all over the world to be a welcoming nation.

Since the start of the war, Scotland's people have opened their doors and their hearts to the people of Ukraine. To date, more than 27,000 displaced people have arrived in the United Kingdom with a Scottish sponsor and more than 21,000 have been sponsored by the Scottish Government. We have welcomed more than twice as many Ukrainian people per capita as any other part of the UK.

Although many Ukrainians have been helped by the Scottish welcome, in turn, we are rewarded by the Ukrainian families who have come here. I say

thank you to those from Ukraine who have made Scotland their home for now. I thank every family for the contributions that they have made in our towns, cities, villages and island communities across Scotland. We have benefited from their community spirit, hard work and friendship.

Like Scotland, Ukraine has a very rich cultural heritage. Many Scots, whether they are colleagues or classmates—I know that ministers are included—have enjoyed sharing stories and learning more about our Ukrainian friends and their country. Only earlier this month, I had the pleasure of visiting the community hub that the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain recently opened in Glasgow. As well as being guided through its extensive programme of community outreach, I was shown some beautiful works of art that were influenced by Ukraine's famous Petrykivka style.

Perhaps the best-known art movement to come out of Glasgow was that of the Glasgow boys, who, in the 19th century, found inspiration in the works of their European peers. It seems fitting that Glasgow continues to be introduced to and influenced by the art of our overseas visitors. I have no doubt that the rich cultural influences that have been brought to us by the people of Ukraine will have a lasting impact for a great many years to come, even once victory has been declared.

However, the people of Ukraine have offered more than cultural enrichment. Our industries, businesses and workplaces are benefiting from the skills and commitment of Ukrainian workers such as the pioneering group of Ukrainian women who are carving a niche in filling Scotland's much-needed tech roles. Thanks to a training scheme that is delivered in partnership by the Royal Bank of Scotland, Code First Girls, Capital City Partnership, Equate Scotland and the Data Lab, Ukrainian women are gaining vital new skills, with many securing engineering roles in RBS's Edinburgh headquarters. It was heart-warming to hear from one of those women that, although she had thought that she would have to abandon her dreams to study technology when she was forced to flee Ukraine, thanks to the programme, she has received the qualifications that she needed to enable her to build her tech career in Scotland—and, I hope, one day, in her homeland of Ukraine.

My message to those who have settled from Ukraine is that they are, and always will be, very welcome here. They will always be proudly Ukrainian, but I hope that, during their time in Scotland, they will also consider themselves new Scots.

I am in no doubt that every member of Parliament has been shocked, appalled and saddened by the violence and the humanitarian crisis that have been caused by the illegal war.

Everyone in Scotland, and the international community, is horrified by the atrocities that are inflicted daily on the people of Ukraine. Intentionally directing missile attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleton) (Ind): The cabinet secretary referred to people being trained in Scotland. However, at the cross-party group on Ukraine on Tuesday evening, it was reported that, sometimes, people who come with qualifications find it difficult to get jobs here and to be accepted.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have discussed that very important point both with Ukrainian colleagues since their arrival and with the Ukrainian consul. The Scottish Government is doing what it can in that field. John Mason will be well aware that, particularly in some of the professions—for example, when it comes to the Nursing and Midwifery Council—the issue is outwith the control of any Government. I assure John Mason that, if there is work that the Scottish Government can do within our own powers, rather than those of independent regulators, we are very keen to continue with such work. I thank the cross-party group for its continuing work to raise awareness on such issues.

When I speak to the Ukrainian consul, he tells me movingly about the soldiers who fight daily for their country—even as we sit today in the comfort of the chamber. They are greatly comforted to know that their families are being looked after and are safe in our friendly atmosphere in Scotland.

That assurance that we are playing our part for a family in the most unimaginable times is such an important effort that the Scottish Government, our local authorities, third sector partners and, indeed, our communities, I am sure, are determined to continue. We all wish a speedy victory for Ukraine and a resolution that restores peace and allows Ukraine and its people to recover from the scars of war that have been inflicted on them.

Providing support and sanctuary for the people of Ukraine will continue to be a priority for the Government, with the support of our partners. As I mentioned, since the start of the war, the important role of local authorities, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, third sector organisations and many volunteers has been remarkable. They have worked tirelessly to provide those who are newly arrived in Scotland with the support and advice that they need to access a wide range of services and opportunities. They have supported many to find long-term housing and access to education in our schools, colleges and universities, and have cultivated many community programmes to help Ukrainians to make Scotland their home.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to each and every member of staff, volunteer and host for everything that they have done. Their efforts are making a positive impact on many lives and are further strengthening the bond between Ukraine and Scotland, which will last into the future.

Many of those efforts have required investment. This year, the Scottish Government will invest more than £40 million in the Ukrainian resettlement programme, which is in addition to our investment of more than £300 million in the two years since the war began. Such investment ensures that Ukrainian people can rebuild their lives and their communities for as long as they need to call Scotland their home. It includes supporting families to move into longer-term housing through the Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund, which has invested about £27 million to bring around 1,290 homes into use across Scotland and provide accommodation for more than 2,100 Ukrainian people.

We continue to work with councils and housing associations on new applications to maximise the number of homes that can be supported by the fund. Some £5 million of capital has been specifically allocated to that budget in the current financial year. We are keen to ensure that we continue to support people into longer-term accommodation. Published data shows that, as of 29 July, 1,145 people who had been displaced from Ukraine were in welcome accommodation, and they occupied 679 rooms. That is a reduction of just over 80 per cent from the peak that we saw in November 2022.

As a nation, Scotland stands for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, both at home and abroad. It is right that we play a key role in supporting humanitarian aid overseas. It is also important that we look to the future and ensure that we support our friends to rebuild their economy, cities and infrastructure so that they can once again become a prospering nation after their victory.

Since 2022, the Scottish Government has given £4 million in financial aid to provide basic humanitarian assistance, including health, water and sanitation facilities and shelter for people who are fleeing the war. That includes provision for the HALO Trust, the Dumfries-based international non-governmental organisation, which is clearing unexploded ordnance in the areas around Kyiv that were liberated from Russian control.

We are also proud to share our expertise to benefit the future of Ukraine. The Scottish Government's chief parliamentary counsel has been working hard to support Ukraine's Parliament. Working with colleagues in the UK, and gathering support from across the Commonwealth, he has provided guidance on

enhancing its legislative capability and has presented on that topic to Rada members and senior officials. That programme of work is being delivered in partnership with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

In addition, the John Smith Trust has undertaken exceptionally important work through its Ukrainian women's leadership programme, which is supporting Ukrainian women as they do the best that they can to provide for themselves and their families when they are here, and, once again, to think to the future, when they will return to Ukraine.

Too much time has passed since the illegal invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, but we must all continue to hope that it will have peace restored soon. Much goes on in our world, and sometimes Ukraine falls from the headlines, but what is important is the message that we send from our Parliament today. Despite that happening from time to time, the Ukrainian people are never far from our thoughts, and they are in our hearts. We will continue to support them—now, and for as long as they need us.

Slava Ukraini!

I move,

That the Parliament reiterates its unwavering solidarity with the people and government of Ukraine in the face of Russia's devastating illegal war; pledges that Scotland will continue to be a welcoming nation for those people who have sought refuge in the country from war and persecution, including refugees, people seeking asylum, people relocated from Afghanistan and displaced people from Ukraine; thanks the people of Scotland for opening their hearts and communities to all; recognises the vital role of those organisations and local authorities that have supported displaced Ukrainians to settle into Scotland's communities; reaffirms that all Ukrainians who have made Scotland their temporary home will be welcome here for as long as they need, and wishes a speedy and peaceful resolution to the war that ensures Ukrainian sovereignty, democracy, independence and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.

15:08

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

It has been more than two years since Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. However, if we take a closer look at the history of Russian aggression, we can see that the war began eight years ago, with the annexation of Crimea and the arming of Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. With the rise of social media, we do not have to look far to see videos of drone and artillery attacks while the world watches on in horror.

As the General Assembly of the United Nations gathers in New York this week, it is right that we reaffirm our support for Ukraine as it continues to fight for its sovereignty and territorial dignity. Yesterday, President Zelenskyy addressed

delegates, when he gave yet another defiant speech calling for real peace. He accused Russia of plotting catastrophic attacks on Ukrainian nuclear plants, following intelligence that he had received. We can all agree that an attack of that scale would be devastating. That is why the United Kingdom must do all that we can to support Ukraine's right to democracy and freedom.

In previous debates about the war in Ukraine, I focused on the real human cost of war, and I will continue with that theme today, because many children in Ukraine have known only destruction, displacement, violence and separation from family and friends. More than 2,000 children have lost their lives since the beginning of the conflict, and as the war rages on, children are being exposed to abuse, sexual exploitation and human trafficking. They are being robbed of their childhood, and many bear scars from which they may never recover.

Children of this war have had to endure two years of catastrophic disruption to their schooling, and many cherished moments that should have been spent with their loved ones have been replaced by fear, anxiety and death. It has robbed them of their education, their happiness and their hope. Children in this situation are paying an extraordinary price at the hands of Russian aggressors. That is why we must stand with Ukraine—for their children and for their future. Scotland must continue to be that welcoming nation that we have been since the start of the war.

Around 27,000 Ukrainians have arrived here since the beginning of the war to flee from the horrors that are unfolding at home. Many Scots opened their homes and their hearts, providing stability, and although the settlement schemes may not have been perfect, many Ukrainians have left their mark here in Scotland. Over the past year, many have decided to return home. Ukrainians love their country. They do not want to be separated from their loved ones and their home for a prolonged period.

One of those is a formidable woman, Tetiana Hurn, whom I have mentioned on many occasions in the chamber. She returned to her home town back in July. She is a talented artist and, while Tetiana lived here in Scotland, she used her gift to give back to Scottish communities. She painted murals for the Moira Anderson Foundation and Falkirk Business Hub in my region. She was commissioned to do artworks in North Berwick and Musselburgh. If you wander down North Berwick's High Street, you will marvel at the mural that she painted to thank the Scottish people for their hospitality and warm welcome. I mentioned earlier the devastating impact that war has on children. I was really pleased to find out that Tetiana is back

home and painting more murals to boost morale and empower young people through art. She truly is an inspiration.

Culture and art are important during times of conflict. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary also picked up on the importance of sharing cultures between us here in Scotland and our Ukrainian friends. Art serves as a visual and emotional record of wartime events, preserving the human experiences and the broader implications of conflicts. It can also be a tool for reconciliation. Ukrainians have drawn on our culture sector to speak about war and their experiences of being in Scotland. An excellent example of that is Class Act Ukraine in Scotland, which is run by Traverse Theatre. The scripts, written by Ukrainian young people and supported by three acclaimed international playwrights and the University of Edinburgh helped to unlock their creativity and potential. Each of the scripts was brought to life by professional artists, which created a bond between our cultures.

In Fife, the Forthview parish church and Dalgety Bay congregation hosted a series of events for refugee week, including a photographic exhibition in June that focused on Ukrainian experiences, which was created by Ukrainian families who regularly meet at the church. The exhibition displayed pictures from before and after the Russian invasion, showing the horrifying realities of war. That is not only an area of reflection for local people but a poignant reminder of how destructive the war has been for Ukraine's infrastructure and economy. We should celebrate the fusion of cultures and the way in which Ukrainians have integrated into our communities, especially in times of darkness.

As long as the war continues, we must continue to open our hearts and our homes to the people of Ukraine. Before I conclude my remarks, I want to address concerns about the Scottish Government's supersponsor scheme. This is by no means a criticism; it is more of a probing question for the cabinet secretary, if she can cover it in her closing remarks. In March, the Government announced that the scheme would be temporarily paused for three months, but we are approaching October and the scheme remains paused.

Because wars are unpredictable, and given the recent significant threats from the Kremlin, this is the right time, in my view, for the Scottish Government to review that pause. Families in Ukraine will rightly be concerned about Putin potentially targeting nuclear plants.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope to be able to reassure Meghan Gallacher that the scheme is kept under review regularly and that we will continue with that, because we recognise that we

have an obligation to continue to consider not just what is happening here but what is still happening in Ukraine. I hope that I can give her that reassurance.

Meghan Gallacher: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for reassuring the Parliament today on the supersponsor scheme. If Scotland is to stand with Ukraine, we must continue to have such schemes in place to ensure that, should people feel unsafe or in need of further refuge, we are there to support them should they decide to make Scotland their temporary home.

My focus today has been on the devastating impact that the war has had on children and young people. I will leave the chamber with a quote from Sonia Khush, the country director for Save the Children in Ukraine, who said recently:

“Not a single child in Ukraine has been spared this war and the atrocities it brought. There is no place across the entire country where children can feel safe, let alone the frontline areas. It is heartbreaking to see children who cannot speak or fear playing or even walking outside because of the immense distress they suffer day after day.”

That is a really solemn message, showing why Scotland must continue to stand with Ukraine.

15:16

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to open for Scottish Labour in this debate.

There are days when we will always remember where we were, and events that live long in the memory. For most of us, for the people of Europe and, not least, for Ukrainians, 24 February 2022 will be one of those days. The return of full-scale war to the European continent rocked the foundations of international norms and brought destruction and terror to a country that has only ever sought to exercise its free will and defend its sovereignty.

In beginning our debate this afternoon, it is important that we recognise that, for all the disagreements that we have in this chamber on a day-to-day basis, and for all the disagreements that we have seen in the United Kingdom Parliament on many issues, on this subject we have seen a common sense of purpose and unity across the Parliament. I would extend that to the unity of purpose that we have seen across Scotland.

I am very pleased to see that the new UK Labour Government has continued the strong support for Ukraine that we saw from the previous UK Government. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, were at the United Nations Security Council yesterday, and their comments showed the continuing strength of support and the role that the United Kingdom

plays in the international community in galvanising support for Ukraine and standing up to the aggression of Vladimir Putin. That aggression, if unchallenged, sends signals to other malign actors that borders can be drawn by force. That was a very important contribution yesterday.

That is why I think that our continued support for Ukraine is so important. It has been an early priority of the new UK Government, and it has always been a priority of the Scottish Government. We must all continue to engage our allies and friends across Europe and beyond on the collaborative efforts to deliver enhanced assistance for Ukraine. The bravery of Ukrainian citizens and soldiers in the early days of the war, when the survival of Ukraine seemed uncertain, and now, in the face of continued Russian aggression, is inspiring. They need us to continue to offer our support. It is critical that they receive the resource and the training that they need to continue to defend their homeland now.

Over the past few weeks and days, the required discussions have taken place on new packages of artillery, air defence, armoured vehicles, the speeding up of deliveries and the commitment of £3 billion a year in military aid for as long as it takes, as critical elements demonstrating that Ukraine can and will outlast the aggression of Putin. It is the least that we owe to those who are not only justly defending themselves and standing up for democracy and the rules-based international order but defending many of us against threats.

In the face of such colossal human suffering on our doorstep, we must continue to provide all the support that we can, not only to fight against that terror machine that is the Russian Government and establishment but to hold open a door for those people who have been forced to flee their homeland.

As the cabinet secretary and Meghan Gallacher have already done, I pay tribute to the organisations, local authorities and members of the public across Scotland who have welcomed displaced Ukrainians into their homes, communities and hearts. Time and again, people have stepped up to support those refugees who come seeking safety from persecution, violence, and conflict, whether from Ukraine or elsewhere around the globe. They represent the very best of us. Their empathy and generosity of spirit as well as practical support to the nearly 214,000 Ukrainians who have arrived in the UK, including the 155,400 who came through the homes for Ukraine programme, have not gone unnoticed and will not be forgotten.

As I was preparing for the debate, I thought about the Irish proverb “Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine”, which means “We live in

one another's shelter". That is a very apt reflection on the plight of those Ukrainians who could, in another time and place, be any of us. We must keep that thought at the heart of our discussions.

I restate to those Ukrainians who are with us here that Scotland will remain their home, that they will have a welcome here for as long as they need and that support will be provided. We on these benches are always ready to work with the Scottish Government where necessary to continue to adapt and enhance that support, and I am sure that I speak for all parties in the chamber who want to continue to collaborate with the Government on that support. I hope that the spirit of partnership continues in the interactions between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, too.

As part of that support, I am delighted that we continue to have a cross-party group on Ukraine, which discusses all these issues and works with the Ukrainian consul general and Ukrainian organisations across the country to keep these issues alive on the agenda.

I was also pleased to see some recently elected Scottish Labour colleagues in Westminster travel to Ukraine to see first hand the destruction that has been wrought and to consider the support that is needed. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to those former MPs and MPs of all parties who have taken part in that experience and have always stood up for Ukraine.

I pay tribute in particular to Stewart McDonald, who is the former Scottish National Party member for Glasgow South. He has taken a keen interest and has worked across the House of Commons in order to keep the issues alive and to stand up to the Russian aggression. It is important that we recognise that.

In demonstrating our solidarity with, and standing beside, Ukrainian people, and in order to ensure that there is a strong welcome for those who must flee, we must continue to always have it in the forefront of our minds that they have made the ultimate sacrifices for their country's survival and freedom. Together, for as long as it takes, we will stand to ensure that Putin and his aggression do not win and that Ukraine is victorious.

15:23

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate and to add to the recognition of consensus that other speakers, including the cabinet secretary, have already expressed. Paul O'Kane in particular spent a large part of his speech recognising the consensus that exists across political parties.

We are, I am pleased to say, united not only in the condemnation of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine but in the recognition that it did not begin in 2022 but, in fact, with the invasion and occupation of parts of Ukraine in 2014. We are united in our support for Ukrainian integrity and sovereignty and the desire for the people of Ukraine to live in peace, secure in their internationally recognised borders.

We are also united in recognition of our duty to Ukrainian refugees and, as the cabinet secretary articulately set out, in our gratitude for the contribution that they make to our society. For me, that is a recognition that being able to host refugees and give refuge to anyone who needs it is a position of privilege.

In acknowledging the humanitarian impact of what has unfolded over the past few years, it is important to recognise that, as with any live, on-going conflict, the precise scale of the human cost is hard to know. Most international sources seem confident that, already, it can be measured in the hundreds of thousands of deaths. We need to recognise that fact in the case of Ukrainians, which includes civilians as well as those who have joined the military to defend their country, but it is also worth acknowledging that many of those who have fought on Russia's side are young soldiers who have been manipulated and lied to by propaganda from Putin's regime about the reasons for the war, as well as those who are convicts and conscripts.

In relation to the support for Ukrainian refugees, we need to continue to put on record our thanks to the organisations that work with them and continue to provide support. Refugees need a huge range of practical support when they are here, whether that is in relation to immigration documents, housing, money, schools, access to public services, including education and healthcare, or the right to interpreters if refugees need them to enable them to live their lives. Scotland has a proud record of welcoming refugees, and we can—and I believe that we must—go further.

It is worth reflecting, and it is important to recognise, that the fact that Scotland and the UK have risen to the challenge in an open and welcoming way for Ukrainian refugees demonstrates to us that we are capable of doing a damn sight better for refugees from around the world, if we choose to do so. I warmly welcome the political unity that we have shown in welcoming Ukrainian refugees, but I only wish that we were able to rise to the same level and offer the same unity of welcome to those who need refuge from elsewhere in the world. We also need to recognise that a recent report published by the Scottish Government has shown that there are live

homelessness cases for displaced Ukrainians in Scotland. There is support in place, but we need to continue to strive to do better.

I am proud of the position that my political family, the Greens across Europe, have taken. Certainly, the European Green Party has been part of the political unity that is in support for Ukraine and opposition to the invasion, but it has also done a great deal to draw the connection to the transition from fossil fuels. That transition away from fossil fuels is not only necessary in the face of climate change but necessary as a way of taking power away from those who abuse it. The geopolitical power of the fossil fuel industry is fundamentally part of Putin's power and his motivation. The European Greens make the case that more renewables would mean more peace, which I think that we need to recognise.

Again, I repeat my call for the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government, if at all possible, to address those who are still seeking to circumvent the sanctions against Russia, including the company Seapeak Maritime, which is based in Glasgow—in fact, it may even be based in the minister's constituency—and is still engaging in the trade in Russian fossil fuels. I know that it is not within the power of the Scottish Government to address that, but I would welcome anything that the Scottish Government can do to raise the UK Government's awareness of that and ensure that such profiteering can be treated as falling within the sanctions so that we can shut that activity down.

I stress that we have to recognise the need for consistency. If we are politically united on the principle that invasion, a war of aggression, the illegal occupation of territory, the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure and the commission of war crimes are unacceptable and must be opposed, they must be opposed not only in Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, but elsewhere in the world.

We must also recognise the extraordinary gulf between the international response to the invasion and occupation of Ukraine and the international response to the on-going genocide in Gaza and the illegal occupation of Palestine. That comparison is one that should shame the world. We should stand with the people of Ukraine, and we should, equally, stand politically united with all peoples who are subjected to such occupation, invasion and war crimes.

15:30

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is a great and powerful thing when the chamber speaks with one voice, and I believe that we do so this afternoon. Scotland stands with

Ukraine, of course, but the Scottish Parliament also stands with our sister, the Verkhovna Rada—the Ukrainian Parliament—in Kyiv.

Let us consider the early hours and days of the full-scale invasion—the extended invasion, if we consider that the invasion began in 2014—in February 2022. A key element of Vladimir Putin's narrative at that time was that Ukraine was a failed state, and that it was led by corrupt, despotic charlatans in the Rada.

It was immensely important, therefore, that the Rada act with one voice, and with cohesion, to demonstrate that the crucial decisions that were required to put the country on a war footing—to pass legislation, to bring in martial law and to turn the economy over to fighting a defensive war against an illegal occupation by Russia—had to be made by the legitimate organs of state power, albeit in the most horrific and terrible circumstances possible. It hardly bears thinking about—the idea that we could hear artillery fire outside the chamber, and yet still pass vital legislation in the interests of our constituents.

To set that in context, there had been multiple failed assassination attempts that week against Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and Viktor Yanukovich was reportedly waiting in Minsk, in Belarus, to be installed as a puppet president at the behest of Putin. With the Russian army just 20km from the Rada, therefore, the Rada met, and the deputies voted.

We saw images such as former President Petro Poroshenko arriving at the Rada in camouflage fatigues, and Kira Rudyk, who is the leader of Holos, my party's sister party in Ukraine, pictured barefoot in her living room, holding a Kalashnikov. It was around that time that she was famously interviewed—this, I think, is evidence of her defiance—about being one of the 10 deputies on the FSB's kill list, and she replied, with some sangfroid, that, a month previously, she had been on a top 10 list of eligible bachelorettes in Kyiv, so those two things cancelled each other out. Such was the defiance, and such was the strength of feeling and unity. The deputies in the Rada voted, by an overwhelming majority, to cease party-political hostilities and come together in the Ukrainian national interest.

I have spoken many times, in many debates, about Ukraine's defiant defence against Russian aggression, but I have never spoken about the solidarity between our two Parliaments. I think that we need to hold on to that solidarity.

It is vital that we recognise, in debates such as this one, that, every day since 2014, and more recently with the full-scale invasion, Putin has coldly and mercilessly terrorised the people of the sovereign nation of Ukraine, turning historic cities

into rubble and battlefields and reducing schools and hospitals to dust. The images of places such as Mariupol, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv could come to define the early days of the century. I am proud of the way that this chamber has today, and continuously since 2022, stood united in defiance of Putin and his regime, and stood in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

Many of us are now under Kremlin sanction for those efforts, but we believe that we need to go further. Liberal Democrats believe that there should be a seizure of frozen Russian assets in the UK, with proceeds being repurposed and directed to financial and military support for Ukraine. Canada became the first G7 country to take that course of action by passing legislation to enable it to do so. The UK Government has reportedly seized around £22 billion of Russian oligarch assets. Imagine what a difference that could make not just to the fighting men and women on the battlefields of Ukraine, but to the humanitarian efforts to rebuild the cities, schools and hospitals that the Kremlin and Putin's ambitions have laid waste to.

I thank those who are involved in the refugee effort and I take my hat off to the Scottish Government for the supersponsor scheme. The refugee welcome hub is located at Gogar, in my constituency, and I pay tribute to workers such as Gavin and Alistair, who have made the traumatic passage from one war-torn country into our country as seamless and welcoming as possible.

With reports that there are more than 290 homeless applications from displaced Ukrainians who are living in Scotland, we know that there is more still to be done. We can never take our eye off of that ball and we need to make sure that we are doing everything that we can.

I recognise that I am coming towards the end of my allocated time, so I will finish with a reflection on where we are in the year and on the flag of Ukraine. The flag of Ukraine, as many members know, depicts the golden wheat fields of Ukraine under a blue sky. As we meet today at harvest time, that is particularly poignant. In the battlefields of the western front in Flanders, there is something called the iron harvest where, every year, the shrapnel and material of war is ploughed up 100 years after the fighting finished there. That will happen in the fields of Ukraine 100 years from now, but the trench warfare that we thought was consigned to the past is now happening on our doorstep.

The flag of Ukraine has a deeper meaning. Yes—it shows wheat and sky above it, but, for the Ukrainian people, that also means freedom above bread. That has always struck me as a poignant example of the defiance and resistance of the Ukrainian people. They deserve our respect.

Glory to the heroes. Glory to Ukraine. Slava Ukraini. Heroyam slava. [*Applause.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As the umpire in the chair, I am required to say to the people in the public gallery, who are most welcome to our Parliament to hear this important debate, that we do not encourage clapping.

We now move to the open debate. We have some time in hand, so I can be generous with speaking time, and members can be generous with interventions, should they so wish.

15:37

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): As convener of the cross-party group on Ukraine, I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in this debate on Ukraine and to highlight the hope and support that the Scottish Government has given, and is still giving, to Ukrainian refugees.

I doubt that many Ukrainians who have come to our country are happy to be refugees. Many have been separated from their country, family, friends, work, education and everything that is familiar to them. To be brought to a new country with a new culture and language must be difficult, to say the least.

Yet, when we look at the situation that they have come from, most of us are horrified. Russia's invasion of the sovereign nation of Ukraine shocked the world. No one could have conceived of the barbarity with which Russia would pursue its illegal war. The dreadful treatment of Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war was far from that which is expected of a civilised nation. The fact that those acts, which I believe to be war crimes, took place on an industrial scale and, worse, continue to do so, must appal all of the civilised world.

Ukraine is at war with a rogue state that respects neither human beings nor civilian property. It is no secret that the Russian state has little more respect for the wellbeing of its people than it has for Ukrainians. No one really knows the casualties that Russia has sustained with its mad policy of using its soldiers as cannon fodder.

The courage and resilience of Ukraine and its people will go down in history. Where does Scotland come into that? Quite rightly, the Scottish Government has provided exceptional support, and I will give a brief glimpse into some of that. There is military aid and, as part of the UK, Scotland has shared in the contribution of hundreds of millions of pounds in assistance to the Ukrainian military.

Since February 2022, the Scottish Government has provided more than £4 million of funding for

humanitarian aid. The innovative supersponsor scheme allowed thousands of Ukrainians to relocate to Scotland, which has the highest number of total applications and arrivals per head of population of any of the four nations of the UK.

The Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund has contributed more than £50 million for registered social landlords to bring properties into use and to increase the supply of housing. By July 2024, nearly 1,300 properties had been brought into use.

A warm Scots future for Ukrainians has provided £1.5 million to third sector organisations and £3.2 million to local authorities to support staffing of recruitment teams. Those are only some of the initiatives that support Ukrainians in Scotland. We do not have to look far to find other groups that provide support in many shapes and forms. I could mention organisations such as Pickups for Peace, which specialises in securing and supplying four-wheel-drive vehicles to Ukraine.

As I look around at the composition of our cross-party group, I recognise the extraordinary resilience of the Ukrainian people in their present adversity. I recognise the energy and the talent that they represent. Our Ukrainian guests do not simply sit back and wait for handouts to be doled out to them; they actively work together with local partners to better their situation.

Yet, however welcome our Ukrainian refugees might be made in Scotland, it is not the home that they came from. It is hard to read of the atrocities carried out against the Ukrainian people and be unmoved. One report that I found especially concerning was that of the forcible removal of Ukrainian children to Russia, where they are brainwashed into becoming Russian, separated from their parents and adopted by Russian parents far from their own country.

I was sufficiently unhappy that I sought to lodge a parliamentary motion condemning those actions. In the motion, I mentioned that Russian President Vladimir Putin and the children's rights commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation, Maria Lvova-Belova, were subject to an international arrest warrant, issued in February 2023, in connection with war crimes relating to kidnapping of children and to forced deportations. Alas, the chamber desk rejected the motion because the persons named were subject to the general data protection regulation and could not be named. That was despite the fact that the arrest warrant had been reported widely in the international media.

One solution that was suggested was to obtain written permission from the two named persons to use their names in that context. Fair enough. Accordingly, I wrote to President Putin and to Commissioner Lvova-Belova seeking their

permission. I wrote to them care of the Russian consulate general in Edinburgh and received a very prompt response from the consul general, categorically refusing permission for the persons to be mentioned in any motion. I have respected that request and they are not mentioned by name in any motion lodged by me as being subject to an international arrest warrant.

Helpfully, the Russian consul general enclosed a bulletin from Commissioner Lvova-Belova dated October 2023. It was heartwarming to hear how happy the Ukrainian children were in Russian camps, where they were placed for their security, wellbeing and protection. Medical and psychological support was being provided and schooling was available at all levels. I could go on but, frankly, I found it difficult to read such patent propaganda.

I believe that Scotland must speak out against the actions of Russia in this war of aggression—it is too easy simply to stand by. Ukraine is not so very far away from our own shores. I certainly feel threatened by what is happening around us, yet too many seem to be complacent and think that nothing bad will come to our country. I hope that they are correct.

For the present, I welcome the support that the Scottish Government continues to give to our Ukrainian friends, who have become part of our family in Scotland and whom I wish well in their new country, however long they choose to remain.

15:43

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Colin Beattie, and I compliment him not only on his speech but on his initiative in writing to the Russian consulate in Edinburgh, as he did. I think that the names that he was not allowed to mention in his motion have been well heard today in the chamber and, I hope, far wider.

Never in my lifetime did I think that I would see a major war on the continent of Europe, but the spirit and resilience of the Ukrainian people in the face of this unwarranted act of aggression by Putin's Russia has been truly awe inspiring. I also pay tribute to the people of our own country, as has been mentioned by many speakers, and the way in which they have rallied to support the people of Ukraine.

The homes for Ukraine initiative is an inspiring success, and I am proud that we retain the spirit of generosity and hospitality towards people from elsewhere in times of need and distress. I also want to pay tribute to His Majesty's Government and the Scottish Government for the work that has been done collaboratively to support Ukrainians who have been brought here to safety.

I am also proud that the United Kingdom has already committed the best part of £10 billion in direct military support and that the British armed forces have given combat training to nearly 50,000 Ukrainian military personnel under operation Interflex.

The commitment of the previous Conservative Government to provide Ukraine with at least £3 billion a year in military aid until at least 2030 has been maintained by the incoming Labour Government, and we have provided Ukraine with an additional £5 billion of non-military support and a further £1 billion in humanitarian aid. Britain has been at the forefront of rallying support for Ukraine through diplomatic efforts and, specifically, in proposing the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia.

Britain has assiduously applied those sanctions, as have others, but some of our economic partners have not done so, and that has allowed the back door to Russian trade to be left open. They have put economic self-interest ahead of the peace by helping Russia to evade the full impact of the sanctions. They have made money out of the sanctions while the rest of us have had to deal with the cost of the resulting global inflation. On that matter, there must be a reckoning—a diplomatic and economic cost for sanction-busting Governments.

That brings me to the actions that we must now take. We are in this for the long haul. It is precisely because hostile powers discerned weakness in the resolve of the west that we are where we are today. Repeated acts of open aggression by Russia have gone unchecked: the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's active intervention in the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the shooting down of flight MH17 in July 2014 by a Russian surface-to-air missile that was launched from pro-Russian separatist territory in eastern Ukraine, and Russia's large-scale military intervention in Syria in 2015. None of those actions was met with an adequate response by the west. In fact, what Putin clearly perceived was a lack of will on the part of the west to do anything.

Then, in August 2021, there was the shambolic and shameful withdrawal from Afghanistan. Tom Tugendhat said at the time:

"This is a harsh lesson for all of us, and if we are not careful, it could be a very, very difficult lesson for our allies, but it does not need to be."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 12 August 2021; Vol 699, c 1281.]

Those were prophetic words, because the lesson of the withdrawal from Afghanistan was not lost on Vladimir Putin. He saw the lack of will and patience, to stay the course, and he took the calculated risk that the west would remonstrate,

but not much more, if he launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am enjoying Stephen Kerr's remarks very much, and he is right to remind us of Russian aggression. However, does he recognise that there is a large and growing number of Russian civilians, in Russia and overseas, in whose name Vladimir Putin does not act, who deserve our support and support from the west in their efforts to topple Putin?

Stephen Kerr: Alex Cole-Hamilton may know that my family has a particular emotional attachment to the people of Russia. I do not believe that the people of Russia are fully informed in respect of the actions of Vladimir Putin. They have certainly become accustomed to the cost of his actions in Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin took that calculated risk, and I want to draw the lesson from it that, if we do not take the hard decisions to stand up to aggression early, the more terrible and expensive it becomes later. If we are to stop this conflict from escalating into a world war, we need to make it clear that we are prepared to defend ourselves and our allies. It is only when the bully sees that he cannot win that he will sue for peace.

The Prime Minister can send a strong signal of our intent to defend the peace by reinstating the previous Government's commitment to increase defence spending to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2030. Because we have—rightly—diverted weapons systems and munitions to Ukraine, we need to replenish our stockpiles. Our armed forces need to pack a bigger punch, and we need scale. Some have argued that we should be putting our defence industrial production capabilities on to a war footing.

If we are serious about keeping the peace, and, after reading what the armed forces minister said yesterday, that sounds like sensible advice to me, we must be prepared to defend it—if necessary, by being ready to go to war.

The message of this debate is that we—Ukraine's allies—will continue to stand by Ukraine by doing everything in our power to enable the Ukrainians to resist and repel the Russian aggressor. If we do not do what is necessary now, we will head into an abyss.

15:50

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): In a number of weeks' time, in our communities we will gather for remembrance day. We will remember the horror of wars past, the loss, the sacrifice, the vulnerability of peace, the need to stand up to tyranny—especially when it is on the march—and the many lessons from history.

We will remember the fact that people who died in those wars, or who were around at the time, were people just like us, leading their lives with their families and friends and doing many of the things that we and our constituents do every day.

All those have been emphasised since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The shocking aspects of the invasion were not only its brutality, which we could see in ways that were not available with the technology of the previous century, but that the people of Ukraine were seeing the loss of their homes; they were engaged in the need to flee and were having to make horrible decisions about whether to go with their children to safety or stay and play a part in the defence of their democracy and territorial integrity. That was all there for us to see.

When so many of our fellow human beings came to our shores, those things were emphasised even more. Our attachment to the idea of their struggle being our struggle was only strengthened.

The Scottish Government's proactivity, as well as that of the British Government, in supporting the people of Ukraine, should be commended and recognised. For me, as MSP for Edinburgh Northern and Leith, that was most pertinent and of most impact in the form of the refugee ship that was at Leith docks. The work that was done by ministers, officials, local government, volunteer organisations and the community of Leith to make our Ukrainian friends welcome in their time of real need made me proud as a constituency MSP and as a Scot.

The contribution of the new Scot Ukrainians, whether during their time in Edinburgh Northern and Leith and elsewhere in this city or in what they have done since, should not be underestimated. What they have brought has enriched our communities. They have been able to do that not only because of their own initiative and determination to play a positive part in Scottish society while they are here, but because organisations such as AUGB Edinburgh and Multi-Cultural Family Base, and even organisations like Leith Athletic Football Club, have all done good work to ensure that families and children have felt welcome and that people can engage in the labour market.

One of the things that we must continue to do—which is why the debate is important—is consider how to enhance and support the life of Ukrainians in Scotland. The cross-party group on Ukraine has done some really good work on that so far.

I take the points that were made about the professions. I have a bit of casework at the moment that involves a constituent of mine who has a practice in the cabinet secretary's

constituency. There are challenges in how to encourage the professional bodies to help people who have skills to work in our communities, so I would like to support the Government in that.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thank Ben Macpherson for giving you in what is a superb speech.

I make this point very gently, because I want to keep the cross-party unity. Does Mr Macpherson accept that the right to work should be a universal right not only for the Ukrainians who now stay in Scotland, but for all those who have fled violence, persecution and war and who now stay in Scotland?

Ben Macpherson: I do. There are people here who want to contribute, so why would we not set a legal framework that enables people to do that? I find it perplexing that we have not got to that point already.

All the contributions that Ukrainians have made in my constituency—which I know they have made across our community—and the friends and constituents who are Ukrainian whom I support and engage with, as well as everything in the international and domestic media, keep Ukraine in our minds every day. We need continually to recognise and be proactive in supporting the resilience of the Ukrainian people and the struggle for democracy and freedom that they are engaged in.

We cannot take security and peace for granted. It is clear from speaking not only to Ukrainians but to people from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and many other of our European friends and allies that, every day, the threat of Russian aggression is now part of their mindset. We need to make sure that we are not complacent about our peace and security.

That reminds me of a quote from the journalist Martin Wolf that I read at the time of the invasion. He said—I am paraphrasing slightly—that we should still hope that, one day, Russia will get a political regime that is worthy of its contribution to civilisation, but that, right now,

“Russia has emerged as a pariah ruled by a gangster. We cannot live in peace and security with such a neighbour.”

He went on to say that the invasion of Ukraine “must not stand”, not only for the sake of Ukraine, but because any success for Putin

“would threaten us all. We are in a new world now. We must understand that and act accordingly.”

Standing up for Ukraine is also standing up for our shared values. Helping Ukraine is helping humanity. Slava Ukraini!

15:57

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

This afternoon's debate is an opportunity for us as a Parliament to reiterate our commitment to supporting Ukraine and its people as they continue to fight against the illegal and unprovoked invasion of their home by Putin's Russia. When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it escalated the existing conflict, with devastating consequences. Among the fatalities, thousands of civilians, including children, have been killed, and millions of Ukrainians have been displaced from their homes and have fled the country, which has created Europe's largest refugee crisis since world war two.

Every day that the war continues, the number of casualties and the amount of damage increase. In the media, we hear about war fatigue—sadly, we are getting used to the images and reports that once shocked us. We must continue to be shocked and appalled by what is happening. That it has endured for so long should only strengthen our response, rather than allowing us to stop paying attention.

Many Ukrainians have come to Scotland to seek refuge. This afternoon, we recognise the work of the many organisations, local authorities and individuals who have supported them in doing so. We pay tribute to all those Scots who took Ukrainian refugees into their homes and helped them to find the support that they needed. Ensuring that they were able to access housing, education, healthcare and other services was an important part of allowing people from Ukraine to live as normal a life as they could.

In Mid Scotland and Fife and across Scotland, people stepped up and welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and communities. Through the sponsorship scheme, thousands of families came to the region, and many are still living and working in our communities. An important part of making them feel welcome was the provision of social opportunities by groups such as the one at Forthview parish church in Dalgety Bay. When people arrived from Ukraine, the church was a place for them to meet and to get practical support, and a number of Ukrainian families regularly met there.

Although they have now moved on from host families to their own tenancies, the Dalgety Bay ladies continue to meet and, as Meghan Gallacher recognised earlier, their stories were highlighted as part of refugee week in June, when the church hosted an exhibition about their lives before and after the Russian invasion, with photographs to demonstrate the impact of war on Ukrainian people.

I am the convener of the cross-party group on Poland, which has strong links with the Ukrainian community in Scotland, and I welcome both the establishment of a cross-party group on Ukraine and Colin Beattie's contribution this afternoon. In the weeks following the invasion, the CPG on Poland heard from the Polish and Ukrainian consuls in Scotland. I recognise the important role that the Polish consulate and community have played and are playing in supporting Ukrainians in Scotland.

The CPG on Poland recently hosted elected members of the Polish Senate, and we discussed the key role that Poland is playing in supporting people who had to flee Ukraine. Poland is a key military supporter of Ukraine, has a security deal with the country and has reiterated support for Ukraine defending itself. However, that is much more than a security arrangement. By May 2022, 3.5 million Ukrainians—53 per cent of those who fled the country—had crossed the border into Poland. The welcome and solidarity that they had from Polish people has been reflected in the response that we have seen from the Polish community here in Scotland.

We are focusing on the domestic response to the war in Ukraine, the support that we are providing to Ukrainians who have come to the UK for protection and safety and the resilience of the Ukrainian people during this horrendously difficult time. In that context, I will mention the BBC World Service.

Sources of trusted journalism are now completely or partially blocked in about 75 per cent of countries around the world. Global conflicts and tensions are now accompanied by the easy spread of disinformation and propaganda. The BBC World Service plays a vital role as an independent, accurate and trusted broadcaster, and it is primarily funded by the UK licence fee. In 2010, the previous UK Government made a hasty decision to transfer responsibility for funding the service from the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the BBC licence fee, but it partially reversed that decision in 2016, which led to an increase in staffing and activity. I hope that the new UK Government will affirm a commitment to the service and recognise its vital role as a national asset.

The BBC World Service broadcasts in Ukrainian and Russian. Although it has been banned in Russia since 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine, because of its drive to report on the realities of war, to accurately record the number of fatalities on both sides and to report international reactions, it still broadcasts into parts of Russia, where it is an important source of information. While Putin pursues a war of aggression on the

ground in Ukraine, there is also a communications war and a battle over who owns the narrative.

Patrick Harvie spoke about the manipulation of the Russian people and the lies that they have been told. It is important that trusted sources of information can get into the country, but Russian journalists have been forced to leave while we know that the Russian media is expanding and making big investments around the world. We must be alert to that increasing threat to truth and transparency.

As part of the UK, we have provided military support and aid, training for personnel and economic and diplomatic support to allow Ukraine to defend itself in this conflict, while we have offered a place of refuge for those who have been displaced. We have heard many examples today of how Ukrainians have been welcomed into homes and communities across the country. Scotland and its people have responded with an open heart to those who are experiencing the devastation of that conflict, and we must keep offering our support as this terrible war continues.

16:03

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): My Ukrainian friend Andre has been constantly in my thoughts since the conflict there escalated in 2022, and I will take some time to share his story, because it really captures much of what the war means on a human level.

I met Andre almost 20 years ago when he was barely out of his teens. He had an infectious humour and, despite being far from home, he became part of my family. He would join us for meals, fitting right into the chaos of all the children running around, and every meal came with his hilarious observations of life. He used to call me his Scottish mama and, although I was actually only a few years older than him, I embraced that title because it was an honour to be a stand-in family for him when he needed that most.

Even now, amid the horrors of war back in his homeland, Andre never forgets to send me a birthday message. It always feels surreal to hear from someone who is living in a war zone—someone who sends me well wishes from a place where every day is a fight for survival. He lives in one of the hardest-hit regions in Ukraine and vlogs about his experience, sharing the unimaginable through his Instagram stories. Some nights he captures the whistles of the missiles going through the air before they hit the ground with a thunderous explosion. It is harrowing to witness the conflict unfold through my friend's eyes. There are nights when we do not know whether we will hear from him again the next day but, each day when he appears, it brings a sigh of relief.

Before the war, Andre had his own grocery delivery service. As time went on, it evolved into a saving grace for many people. He now delivers food and parcels to those who are in need, supported by donations worldwide. He takes food parcels to some of the hungriest people in his war-torn land. In the past year, I have seen him delivering food to elderly folk in an abandoned care home, to terrified women and children in underground train stations and to some of the most vulnerable groups in the most dangerous situations.

Andre's humour and warmth have never left him. He gifts flowers to elderly women. He calls one of them his babushka and she lives for his visits. Only a few months ago, Andre lost his dog—his loyal companion—and, days later, his mother. Still, he pushes forward. He does so not for himself but for the people who rely on him and his service. That is the spirit of Ukraine—a resilience that refuses to be extinguished by war—and it is the spirit that Scotland proudly stands with.

Scotland has always been a welcoming place for those who are fleeing war and persecution. Last year, I met a Ukrainian family that my father had befriended. Vadim, his wife and his two daughters are all profoundly deaf. They uprooted their life because of the war and drove all the way to Scotland. Although my dad and Vadim were from two different countries, their language barrier was broken due to the power of sign language.

We spent time last year socialising, and the young girls loved jumping on the trampoline with my two granddaughters. It was a joy to see those children feeling carefree after what they had been through. I even took Vadim to the Buckie car show, and he was treated to a proper north-east fish supper. I might add that it was fish straight from the boat—it is only the best up in the north-east. Throughout that time, we knew that, deep down, their homeland and their people were never far from their minds.

Those connections are a powerful reminder that, throughout the chaos of war, the coming together of humans in genuine ways can transcend the barriers of conflict. Whether we are bound by language, humour or simply being a stand-in family member, I am proud to stand with Ukraine.

Since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, Scotland has opened its arms to the people who are fleeing war and persecution. More than 27,000 displaced Ukrainians have found refuge here. That is the highest figure per capita of any UK nation. Our warm Scots welcome has been more than just a phrase: it is a promise.

We have welcomed those individuals not just for a brief stay but with a commitment to support them

as they rebuild their lives. However, as we continue to offer refuge to those who are fleeing war, we must also recognise the need for stability. Many Ukrainians are beginning to rebuild their lives in Scotland, finding work, enrolling their children in school and contributing to the fabric of our communities, but we need to ensure that they have the resources and the support to feel truly at home for as long as they need to.

Andre's story and the stories of people such as Vadim and his family remind us that war strips away the trivialities of life and leaves us with what truly matters, which is human connection, resilience and compassion. This is the kind of nation that we are: one that steps up in times of need and offers refuge not just for today but for as long as it is needed—until peace is restored and Ukraine's sovereignty is fully respected.

As I reflect on Andre's resilience, on the courage of Vadim and his family and on all the Ukrainians who now call Scotland home, I am filled with pride. Their stories are a part of our story now, and their fight for survival is our fight for justice and peace. Scotland stands with Ukraine, today and always. Slava Ukraini!

16:09

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands (Con)): It is right that we commit our unwavering support for Ukraine and the deterrence of the illegal Russian invasion. However, before I discuss what we need to do, I need to look back at what we failed to do.

I need not remind the Parliament that, on 5 December 1994, the UK signed the Budapest agreement, along with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Russia and the US, undertaking that we would protect Ukraine's sovereignty. All the countries stood by to allow Ukraine to disarm—to remove the nuclear weapons that had been left on its soil. The US undertook to do that, and we paid for it, along with many other countries.

It was therefore sad that, on 27 February 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, and on 21 March that year, when Putin annexed it, we did nothing. In fact, Barack Obama stood back and said that Russian actions were a problem but not a threat to the US. How wrong he was, because those actions and those alone emboldened Putin. It was a huge mistake. As the skirmishes continued along the Donetsk and Luhansk border, we should have done more. We did little.

On 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, we finally mobilised. We took action. We—the UK especially—provided a huge amount of anti-tank weaponry to deter the Russians, but it required the Ukrainians to hold them back. Since that time, there has been almost a stalemate.

First, the Wagner group forced people forward in its special military operation; meat grinder operations killed hundreds of people; waves of convicts and criminals were pushed forward; and war crimes were committed in children's hospitals in Kyiv and Dnipro. That was absolutely horrendous.

We—the west—did much. As I said, the UK supplied next-generation light anti-tank weaponry. The west as a whole supplied—I think I have these totals right—382 tanks, 485 howitzers and 82 multibarrelled missile launchers. However, that is not enough—it is so not enough—because Ukraine stands firm where it can, using the weapons that we have given it, but is running out of ammunition to deter the Russians, who seem to push forward relentlessly, ignoring the costs.

We have given financial support. So far, I think, £380 billion has been given to Ukraine, and the UK has given £13 billion. That sounds like a massive amount of money—and it is—but it is not achieving what we need to do. As a soldier, I know that there are no half attempts at war. We either commit fully to it and allow the Ukrainians to defend themselves properly, or we just prolong the pain and the suffering. Shortly, therefore, we will have to come up with a decision on what we allow Ukraine to do with some of the weapons that we have given it.

There will be some disquiet and concern when we talk about the Storm Shadow missile that has been provided to Ukraine being used in Russia, but Russia is where all the ammunition is being stockpiled to be forced forward into Ukraine. We cannot hold the Ukrainians' arms behind their backs and stop them from defending themselves against Russia.

I know that it will take time, and I know that we will wrestle with it, as we wrestled with the issue of supplying aeroplanes and tanks across the border, with Russia saying that that would be a direct threat to it. Well, the biggest direct threat to Russia was invading Ukraine, and we have to be wholehearted in our defence of Ukraine and give it the resources that it needs to defend itself properly, because I do not believe, at this stage, that there is any way to negotiate with a megalomaniac—a narcissist—in the form of Putin.

Putin is prepared to allow his country to suffer impossible losses. I think that the latest figure is 70,000 Russian dead. When will enough people in Russia understand the casualties that they are suffering? Only then will Putin be forced to the table. We need to ensure that that happens. All wars are eventually solved not by armed conflict but by politicians, when armies either have some form of victory or run out of the resources that they need to continue fighting. We must ensure that Ukraine does not run out of such resources. Only

once this war has been won—and we have to understand that it is a war—will we be able to give the refugees in Scotland what they really want, which is to go back to their own country.

My plea to the Scottish and UK Governments, and to everyone else across the world, is to continue to provide Ukrainians with weapons—but with enough weapons so that they do not have to stop their offensives and their defence of their country because they are running out of ammunition.

16:15

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP):

I am pleased to speak in the debate. I associate myself with the opening remarks of the cabinet secretary and, indeed, with those of members across the chamber. How good it is to see representatives of our Scots-Ukrainian community here with us in the public gallery. I am sure that all of us here welcome them warmly.

The debate comes at a vital time for Ukraine and for the prospects of its victory against Russian aggression. That is essential for democracy not only in Ukraine but across Europe. First and foremost, Ukraine is fighting for its own survival. However, we must never forget that this is a battle waged on behalf of all of us. If Vladimir Putin were to emerge victorious in Ukraine—an unthinkable prospect—the threat that he would then pose to Russia's neighbours, and to peace across Europe, would be grave indeed. That is why solidarity in deeds as well as in words—in fact, in deeds more than in words—matters so much.

On that front, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and the whole country can be proud. As others have said, more than 26,000 Ukrainians have sought refuge here in Scotland, most of them under the supersponsor scheme that I was proud to establish during my time as First Minister. Earlier in the debate, I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary confirm that reopening that scheme remains under consideration. It is also worth mentioning, albeit as an aside, that the process of getting it up and running was an example of excellent co-operation between the Scottish and UK Governments—one from which lessons could perhaps be learned.

I agree with Patrick Harvie that it is our moral obligation as a country—indeed, as human beings—to welcome refugees and not to demonise them. That should apply to all people who seek refuge, from wherever in the world they come. The supersponsor scheme is vital, but of course it is not the only support shown by the Scottish Government. There has also been significant humanitarian aid, consignments of medical supplies and support for the crucial work

of the Halo Trust. Our support also encompasses strong backing for effective sanctions. As other members have noted, right now it is open to question how effective the sanctions regime is. That must now be reinforced.

As President Zelenskyy is in the United States presenting his plan for victory, the point that I want to make, and which other members made earlier in the debate, is about the wider situation and the importance of not only maintaining solidarity with Ukraine but stepping it up. In the past few days, we have reached a critical juncture. Despite Ukraine's military successes in recent times, Russian forces have made significant territorial gains in the east of the country. They are now bearing down on further targets, which, if they succeed, would threaten Ukraine's supply routes into the eastern region of Donetsk.

That is happening right now, and at a time when, whether we like it or not—and we in the chamber do not like it—the attention of the world is drifting. The focus on the developing horror in the middle east is both understandable and right. Indeed, as Patrick Harvie rightly said, our principled support of Ukraine should apply just as strongly now to the people of Palestine and, indeed, to others who are being threatened with aggression across our world. However, that should not, and must not, be at the expense of Ukraine.

It is also a hard but inescapable fact that political turmoil and instability are threatening the solidity of the coalition that has supported Ukraine over the past two years—for example, we have the rise of the far right in parts of Germany and, of course, the possible outcome of the US election. I will be far from the only one in the chamber who is fervently hoping for a Kamala Harris victory in November but, unfortunately, the threat of a second Trump presidency cannot be dismissed. One of the many dire consequences of such an outcome could be for Ukraine. The risk of Trump forcing a so-called peace that rewards Putin's aggression would be real.

Stephen Kerr rightly talked about the disgrace of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, leaving the people—particularly the women—of that country to a terrible fate. However, we should remember that that had its roots in decisions that were taken by Donald Trump to do deals with the Taliban. That should stand as a very clear warning now. This, then, is a time for all those, including Scotland and the UK as a whole, who have stood steadfastly with Ukraine to step up and renew our solidarity. This Parliament is not responsible for decisions on military assistance, but we can and must raise our voices.

The full detail of President Zelenskyy's plan is not in the public domain, but the key strands, including NATO membership and security

guarantees for Ukraine, are known. Aspects of it—in particular, the proposal to allow Western-supplied long-range Storm Shadow missiles to be used against targets in Russia—need careful consideration of the possible consequences. However, as that consideration is being given, we must also remember that Ukraine not winning this war has grave consequences.

Those consequences would be felt most of all by the people of that country, but the hard fact is that we would all pay a price. Ten years ago, when Putin's assault on Ukraine started with the annexation of Crimea, the world did not act. The hard lesson from that time—that appeasement of brutal narcissists such as Vladimir Putin emboldens them—needs to be learned. Decisions that will help Ukraine to decisively win this war, for the sake of us all, need to be taken, and they need to be taken quickly. As well as continuing with our own acts of support and solidarity, that is a message that this Parliament can and should send very loudly and very strongly today.

I support the motion. Slava Ukraini!

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We move to closing speeches.

16:22

Patrick Harvie: I want to reflect again on the political unity that has been expressed across the chamber on a number of fronts. In particular, quite a number of members have spoken about the lives of Ukrainian refugees in their communities the length and breadth of Scotland. The cabinet secretary was the first, but by no means the only, member to reflect on that.

That is a reminder, as I said earlier, of why the opportunity to offer refuge is always a privilege. Far too much of the UK's political discussion about asylum seekers and refugees is about portraying them as a burden—portraying as a burden the idea that we offer asylum or refuge to those who need it. To be the one who has to flee violence, as those from Ukraine have done, to take a risk to get out and try to find safety, and to ask another country for refuge—that is what it is to bear a burden. To be the one who is asked is a privilege, and we should always remember that.

The images that were most clear to me on our television screens and in our newspapers in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine related to discussions about how to offer safe routes for Ukrainian asylum seekers, how to gear ourselves up to prepare to support and provide safe and secure accommodation for children who had been separated from their families and refugees who had disabilities, who were traumatised by their experiences or who had other specific needs when they arrived. If only

those concerns characterised our entire debate on refugees and asylum seekers across Scotland and the UK, and indeed the rest of the world.

Scotland's and the UK's unity in our support for Ukrainian sovereignty and the principle of its national self-determination within internationally recognised borders—and condemnation of any country using invasion, occupation or a war of aggression to pursue self-interest, as Russia has done—is important. As several members, including Nicola Sturgeon in particular, towards the end of the debate, reflected, anything that allows the possibility that Russia ends up being rewarded by an imposed unjust peace is not only a threat to Ukraine and Ukrainians but a threat to all countries. I say again that we must follow that principle through—yes, by supporting Ukraine but also by applying it elsewhere.

It is very clear that Russia is in flagrant breach of international law. In fact, it is showing utter disregard for international law. The Geneva conventions require parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilian and military targets. Although they allow civilian-owned infrastructure to be military objectives in some circumstances, that discretion is severely limited. The daily images that we have seen from Ukraine bear out clearly that those basic principles are being ignored by Russia without a shred of concern. There are other international instruments, such as the Rome statute, that prohibit the attacking of civilian targets. The fact that Russia is consistently targeting energy sources in Ukraine, destroying civilian infrastructure and indiscriminately targeting civilian housing demonstrates once again its flagrant disregard.

That reminds us that the framework of international law and security is fundamentally broken. The UN Security Council has among its permanent members the world's biggest arms dealers, including the Russian Federation. I think that, technically, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—the USSR—still holds that seat, but in practice it is held by the Russian Federation. In fact, it rose to the presidency of that institution at the time of the full-scale invasion. The UN Security Council is the institution that is charged with the preservation and maintenance of world peace. How on earth are we to accept that it is a valid approach to preserving world peace when those perpetrating war are given permanent and privileged status in it?

If peace is a global objective, we have to recognise that justice is a prerequisite for peace, and far too much of the world's power is wielded by those who profit from war. One member suggested today that, if we want to keep the peace, it means arming for war. I do not believe that peace is achieved on the basis of the fear of

consequences. All that that achieves is the cessation of hostilities until one side or the other detects an opportunity or a chance to act. Pouring ever more of the world's resources into the arms trade will not make the world safer; it will only give ever more power to those who profit from war.

War is an atrocity that is committed by the powerful against the powerless. We need a recognition that western countries that are currently quite rightly rallying support for Ukraine have been complicit for a long time—over decades—in allowing kleptocrats, human rights abusers, fossil fuel profiteers and those involved in the arms trade to amass ever more power. If we want to break that cycle, we have to take power away from those who so clearly abuse it. Putin is the most obvious example of that on the world stage at the moment, but he is by no means the only one.

16:29

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate for Scottish Labour. We are now two and a half years into Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, millions of people displaced and countless lives forever changed to satisfy the ego of a despot.

Despite the challenges that that war has brought, which are minuscule in comparison with those that people who live in Ukraine face, we have made it clear, once again, that we stand against aggression and with the people of Ukraine.

I am proud that the Scottish Parliament is united in its support for Ukraine. I agree with members including Alex Cole-Hamilton that this is not a party-political issue and that our position is based on principles that we all uphold and in which we all believe.

Democracy, freedom, the right of all to self-determination—those are the values that Putin has discarded with his imperialist project. As he threatens those values with contempt, he tightens his grip on Russia: on Tuesday, the United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation presented her report, which found that

“The country is now run by a state-sponsored system of fear and punishment, including the use of torture with absolute impunity.”

We must do as much as we can to support Ukraine and its people, so that Putin's autocracy is not unleashed on them.

Members including Stephen Kerr have mentioned the UK Government sending billions in military aid. Although the party in government at Westminster has changed, our support for Ukraine

will not. The work that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are doing should show Putin that we are not going anywhere.

Paul O'Kane rightly raised the Prime Minister's recommitment of £3 billion a year in military aid for as long as it takes for Ukraine to win. There is also a commitment to train Ukrainian troops throughout 2025 and to send more equipment, because that war is not just Ukraine's, but all of ours. As Nicola Sturgeon mentioned, its outcome is key to the security of Europe and that of the UK. We cannot stand by while civilians die and international law is broken. I join Patrick Harvie and Nicola Sturgeon in stating that that principle must extend to conduct in Gaza and Palestine.

I join the cabinet secretary and others in noting the Scottish public's support for our Ukrainian friends. Meghan Gallagher mentioned the thousands of Ukrainians that the Scottish public welcomed into their homes, and the thousands more who were welcomed through the supersponsor scheme. Last year, Edinburgh's welcome hub in Gogarburn house opened, helping people settle here for the long term.

Claire Baker and Colin Beattie mentioned the work that the third sector and other organisations have done to support the settlement of Ukrainians in Scotland: volunteers met almost 4,000 refugees as they arrived in Edinburgh airport; Volunteer Edinburgh distributed thousands of welcome bags; and, earlier this year, South Queensferry's Hannah Beaton-Hawryluk received an MBE for her work with Edinburgh's AUGB raising millions in aid. The cabinet secretary noted AUGB's Glasgow branch.

Members have recognised and reaffirmed that Scotland is a welcoming nation to those who are fleeing conflict or persecution, whether that be in Ukraine, Afghanistan or anywhere else. Two years into the invasion, we must continue to work to ensure that those people who have had to flee their country do not face destitution.

Alex Cole-Hamilton said that almost 300 homelessness applications have been made by Ukrainian households in the past year, which should be concerning to us all. We have done great work so far. The Scottish Government has many avenues of support to ensure that Ukrainians can integrate as best they can. In this debate, we have shown that Scotland's support for the people of Ukraine has not faltered. To Ukrainians in Scotland, I say: know that you are welcome here and that we stand with you. In his address to Ukrainian nations, President Zelenskyy called for nations to continue to support Ukrainians' efforts for a just and peaceful future. Scotland will continue to be one of those nations.

16:35

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. There has rarely been a time in the Parliament's 25-year history when it has been more important to have a clear message on external affairs. When it comes to Ukraine, the message from members on the Conservative benches could not be clearer: we stand with Ukraine; the Parliament stands with Ukraine; and, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, Scotland stands with Ukraine. I hope that that message can be understood as clearly today as it was in February 2022.

Thinking back to that time is a stark reminder of how much uncertainty lay ahead. For the first time in decades, we were witnessing a land war in Europe. All too quickly, we became used to seeing images of shattered and broken cities; of civilians fleeing from their homes in fear and trepidation; and of Russian missiles devastating whole communities every day. Perhaps naively, many of us assumed that those images belonged to the Europe of the 20th century. Yet, all of a sudden, we found ourselves seeing such images in 2022. Two and a half years later, we are still seeing them.

As we debate the issue, I believe that we can be proud of the United Kingdom's response to the conflict so far. Total military aid has reached £7.8 billion, including £3 billion in support this financial year. Russian forces have lost more than 3,000 tanks, and British anti-tank missiles have no doubt played a key role in that. Meanwhile, operation Interflex has allowed the United Kingdom to train more than 45,000 Ukrainian troops, and I am pleased that the scheme will continue throughout 2025. At the same time, Scotland can be proud of the fact that, since the conflict began, more than 27,000 Ukrainians have been settled in Britain with a Scottish sponsor, which is a massive achievement.

None of us wants to see anything other than a continuation of the fighting spirit of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people—and we have seen that fighting spirit time and time again. Despite how well Ukraine has been able to stand its ground against the Russian offensive so far, the future of the conflict remains uncertain. Reports suggest that the Kremlin is still unwilling to hold genuine peace talks. Meanwhile, President Zelenskyy continues to send a message of hope and positivity. During his visit to the United States this week, he stated:

“we are closer to peace than we think.”

We all hope that that is the case.

Today, President Zelenskyy has presented his victory plan in the White House, and he has talked about that being a path to a “diplomatic way out” of the war, which is also to be welcomed. At the same time, we must understand the complexities of achieving that. I will not be alone in hoping that President Zelenskyy is right about much of that.

Just as with previous debates on the issue, there has been no shortage of important contributions from members across the chamber this afternoon. I will mention some of them.

The cabinet secretary spoke about solidarity and the need to be strong. She also spoke about the community spirit that has been evident across Scotland, and the ability of Scotland and Ukraine to support one another through partnerships in both business and culture. That whole idea of working together and supporting each other has been, and continues to be, crucial.

My colleague Meghan Gallacher spoke about Ukraine's right to democracy, the country's culture, the children who have suffered and the individuals who are paying the price for the war day to day. Although those who are here in Scotland are secure, every day, they see and hear what is happening in their homeland, and that is distressing for them.

Paul O'Kane spoke about our common sense of purpose in supporting Ukraine, which is very important. He referred to the need to enhance our support and to supply resources and manpower, and to hold open a door for Ukrainian people. We need support mechanisms in place for our councils and for our communities and community groups.

Political consensus is very important. Alex Cole-Hamilton referred to speaking with one voice, which is vital. Our unity and solidarity defines us. We must ensure that we, as individuals and collectively, put out that message of solidarity for the future.

Stephen Kerr made an eloquent speech, as we have heard him do many times before. He talked about the positive response and the support from the British armed forces, but he also mentioned the fact that, despite the current sanctions, a back door to Russian trade has been left open. Diplomatic and economic support has been put in place, but we need to be in it for the long haul, defend ourselves and stay the course. Those are vitally important messages that we need to get across.

I am delighted about the involvement with the Ukrainian community from those in the Parliament. For example, the cross-party group has supported, and continues to support, work in that regard. Claire Baker talked about truth and transparency, which is vital. The way in which the messages go

out—how they are put across—to the nations of the world is important. We need to have spirit—that is vital.

On the day that the war started, Parliament held a debate in the chamber, and all parties sent a clear message of solidarity and support for Ukraine. Back in February 2022, we refused to write off the Ukrainian people in their fight against Putin. Today, in September 2024, we still refuse to do so, and we will fight their corner to ensure that the Ukrainian people are supported.

As nations the world over have said, there can be no suggestion of anything other than providing full support, and no wavering in that support. We must be clear that we will stand by the Ukrainian people for as long as it takes. Once again, I pay tribute to the schools, health organisations, businesses, communities and social enterprises that have provided support—

Bob Doris: Will the member take an intervention?

Alexander Stewart: I am happy to do so.

Bob Doris: I apologise for cutting across the member's eloquent comments; I thank him for giving way. He is absolutely right to talk about what a betrayal it would be if we did not stay the course with the people of Ukraine, and the message that that would send out globally. Mr Harvie made that point as well. It would send out the wrong message to the Taliban in Afghanistan, and to the Kurds, who, across four nations in that part of the world, still suffer great persecution. This is about ensuring that the west takes a stand, and does so consistently, and the front line of that stand is to back the people of Ukraine. Would Mr Stewart agree with that?

Alexander Stewart: We have to ensure, as I said, that we have a common sense of purpose. There is an opportunity for us to fight the corner of the Ukrainian people, and we all want to see the end of the war. To make that happen, we have to show solidarity with one another and to each person in the community.

In conclusion, as we approach the thousandth day of the war in Europe, let there be no doubt that Scotland truly stands with the Ukrainian people, as does the United Kingdom. Once again, this Parliament gives its unwavering support, and we look forward to the day when the Ukrainian people can go back, enjoy the opportunities in their homeland and move forward.

16:44

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I thank the cabinet secretary for bringing this debate to the chamber and I welcome members' contributions, which underline our unwavering

support for Ukraine and its people. I also welcome the members of the AUGB Edinburgh community who are in the public gallery.

As we sit in this chamber of democracy, it is almost incomprehensible to envisage the atrocities that are being inflicted on the Ukrainian people as a result of Putin's aggression. We watch the news daily and see the heartbreaking impact of war on families and communities. We are in absolute admiration of the Ukrainian people's bravery and resilience in their fight for sovereignty, freedom and democracy. The people of Scotland are united and we stand with Ukraine, as we do with all those who seek refuge within our borders.

I will take a moment to respond to the comments of my colleagues around the chamber. I listened carefully to Meghan Gallacher, who eloquently reminded us of the plight of the children and the fact that, for generations, they will be recovering from the trauma of their lost education, childhood and hope. On her comments about the supersponsor scheme, I remind members that current visa holders can apply for an 18-month extension through the Ukraine permission extension scheme, which provides Ukrainians with potentially up to four and a half years of residency in the UK. The scheme will open to applications in early 2025.

Paul O'Kane commented on the importance of a collaborative and cohesive cross-governmental response. I agree with that and we will continue in that spirit with the new UK Government.

Patrick Harvie was right to highlight the need to change the narrative around refugees and asylum seekers from being about their burden to being about our privilege. That was very well put.

With regard to his comments regarding a letter that he and Ross Greer sent to the First Minister on 14 August, the First Minister replied to Patrick Harvie on 18 September to clarify the Scottish Government's constraints. We cannot impose a blanket ban on Scottish Government support based solely on the fact that companies are on the UN database. Additionally, the letter clarified that no two conflicts are identical and that we have to take decisions against the specific circumstances.

I thank Colin Beattie for his work as convener of the CPG and I thank all of its members. I also thank him for highlighting the efforts of the Scottish Government in supporting Ukrainians by opening not only our hearts but our country. As other members have mentioned, since the war began, 27,000 Ukrainians have been sponsored in Scotland either by individuals or by the Government—twice as many per capita as have been sponsored in other parts of the UK.

My colleagues Alexander Stewart, Foysoil Choudhury, Stephen Kerr, Alex Cole-Hamilton and

Edward Mountain highlighted beautifully the spirit and resilience of Ukrainians and re-emphasised our standing with Ukraine against Russia's illegal war against Ukraine and its people.

Claire Baker highlighted the role of churches, which I thought was particularly poignant. It is something that we often forget to mention. As places of sanctuary, it is natural that churches would open doors for communities to congregate, get support and solace, and reduce social isolation at times of need.

She also commented on the war of communications and the value of having trusted sources of reporting and journalism. I pay tribute to the journalists who work day in, day out to bring us accurate information, often putting their own lives at risk.

Karen Adam eloquently reminded us of the experiences of the people who remain in Ukraine and their humanitarian efforts for their neighbours in the middle of war zones.

Nicola Sturgeon reminded us of her welcome and very respected part in the supersponsor scheme. I emphasise the cabinet secretary's comments on the reopening of the scheme, which remains under review. We carried out the latest review in July 2024, and we keep that open. There are seven criteria to make sure that, if we reopen the scheme, it is safe and deliverable.

I was glad to hear the stories of positive impacts that people from Ukraine have had on communities across Scotland. We have also heard of the challenges that are faced regarding qualifications and recognition of skills. I was reminded of, and will share a story about, a recent visit to a community centre in Ardrishaig, known locally as the egg shed, where I had the opportunity to meet a truly impressive lady from Ukraine. Like so many, her career was disrupted when she fled the war. In her case, she was a qualified teacher—but there is no bias there. However, once settled in Scotland, she was able to eventually continue her career, first working as a classroom assistant in a local school, before becoming a fully registered qualified teacher with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. She is now making a real impact in her community by not only helping inquisitive young Scottish minds but supporting the 12 Ukrainian children in that local school.

It is heartening to hear how those who have fled from Ukraine as a result of war are helping to shape our community and our workplaces. Their contribution to our economy, our cultural heritage and our communities supports Scotland as an inclusive, innovative and welcoming nation.

Ben Macpherson noted the forthcoming remembrance day. In a few days, on 1 October,

the people of Ukraine will face a solemn day known as defenders day. It is a national day of remembrance for those members of the Ukrainian armed forces who have fallen, as well as a celebration of their veterans. I am honoured to share that I have been invited to take part in the defenders day service this Sunday, representing the Scottish Government, alongside members of the Ukrainian community at Glasgow cathedral.

I remind everybody that it is always a privilege to join our new Scots to not just share in moments of cultural and historic significance and take part in celebrations, but support one another through moments of remembrance and reflection. It feels pertinent that, ahead of a weekend when Ukraine reflects on those who have been lost and the great many sacrifices that have been made in the name of democracy, today, the Scottish Parliament stands together and says with one voice, "We stand with Ukraine and we stand with all those who need us." [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
Thank you. That concludes the debate on Scotland stands with Ukraine.

Motion without Notice

16:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, to bring forward decision time 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 4.53 pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:53

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-14655, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on Scotland stands with Ukraine, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament reiterates its unwavering solidarity with the people and government of Ukraine in the face of Russia's devastating illegal war; pledges that Scotland will continue to be a welcoming nation for those people who have sought refuge in the country from war and persecution, including refugees, people seeking asylum, people relocated from Afghanistan and displaced people from Ukraine; thanks the people of Scotland for opening their hearts and communities to all; recognises the vital role of those organisations and local authorities that have supported displaced Ukrainians to settle into Scotland's communities; reaffirms that all Ukrainians who have made Scotland their temporary home will be welcome here for as long as they need, and wishes a speedy and peaceful resolution to the war that ensures Ukrainian sovereignty, democracy, independence and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:53.

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