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Scottish Parliament

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

Point of Order

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

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You will already be aware that significant details of this afternoon's ministerial statement on helping older people with energy costs have been widely published in national papers this morning. That information could only have come from the Scottish Government.

Yet again, publicity is being put ahead of policy and scrutiny. Presiding Officer, do you agree that that is unacceptable, and will you ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice to explain the breach of protocol and apologise to you, the Parliament and our constituents, whom we are here to represent? Given that most of the information is already in the public domain, are you content that the statement should go ahead as planned and, if so, in what format?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour. I am aware that there are reports in the media in relation to the ministerial statement that is scheduled for this afternoon on supporting older people with increasing energy costs. Members are aware of my expectation that, in line with long-established guidance, where a ministerial statement has been scheduled by the Parliament, the content of the statement should be first made to the Parliament. I am looking into the matter and any decision will be made known to the Parliament.

General Question Time

11:41

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to general question time. I would be grateful for concise questions and responses so that we can include as many members as possible.

Electricity Infrastructure Consenting

1. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what correspondence it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding its proposed reforms to electricity infrastructure consenting in Scotland. (S6O-04029)

I note my entry in the register of members' interests in respect of current and proposed pylon wayleaves.

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): In November 2023, the previous Conservative-led UK Government agreed to review Scottish consenting in its transmission acceleration action plan, as a response to recommendations from the UK Electricity Networks Commissioner, Nick Winser. Our officials have been working closely with UK Government counterparts on that work since February 2024, albeit with a pause during the election period, to impart a better understanding of the issues that are faced by all relevant stakeholders in Scotland, from developers to communities. During that period, the two Governments have exchanged formal correspondence to acknowledge the on-going work and established clear expectations. Engagement is now progressing in collaboration with the new UK Government.

Alexander Burnett: Constituents have complained that the consultation is not user friendly, with the bulk of the questions directed towards business. The period in which to make submissions was only one month and the consultation closes tomorrow. Many of my constituents believe that the Government has deliberately made it difficult in order to reduce the number of submissions from people whose communities will be destroyed by the projects. Will the minister confirm whether he has any influence to extend the submission period?

Alasdair Allan: I am not quite sure whether Alexander Burnett fully appreciates that the Electricity Act 1989 is reserved, UK Government legislation and that changes to the relevant clauses will ultimately be made by the UK Government. Nonetheless, the Scottish Government has been working closely with our UK

counterparts and has co-designed the consultation. I am satisfied that many organisations and communities are taking part in it, but I remind Alexander Burnett of the role of the UK Government in it, too.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The independent Climate Change Committee has forecast that, for the Scottish and UK Governments to meet net zero targets, electricity supply must be doubled to meet demand, which would mean a significant increase in electricity infrastructure projects across the country. Will the minister advise how we can, on the one hand, work with local communities and protect our natural environment, while, on the other, being a key enabler of decarbonisation and green economic growth?

Alasdair Allan: Rona Mackay points to our twin aims of ensuring that we have a fair process and ensuring that we decarbonise the country. I am satisfied that we are seeking to achieve both those aims. In collaboration with officials and ministers at the UK Government end, we are seeking to ensure not only that we make new projects easier to develop but that we make the process fairer and simpler and, indeed, that we update it in the way that the process has already been updated in England.

Additional Support Needs

2. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that students with additional support needs receive adequate resources and tailored educational support. (S6O-04030)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all students with a disability, a long-term medical condition or additional support needs are supported as they study in further and higher education.

The Equality Act 2010 places a specific duty on colleges and universities to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students can access education and any related services. We have also opened up living cost support to disabled students who are studying full-time distance learning courses, who are unable to study campus-based courses because of their disability.

Rona Mackay: What progress has been made in relation to colleges and universities that builds on the measures that are currently in place to support students with additional support needs?

Graeme Dey: In 2023-24, the number of full-time higher education students with disabilities or

additional support needs who were supported by disabled students allowance increased to 5,855, which represented a 5.4 per cent increase over the year. The support comes to a total of £14.1 million, which is an increase of 18.4 per cent over the year.

The data also shows that we now have a record number of new students at university with a recorded disability or an additional support need. In Scotland's colleges, a record level of learning hours was delivered to learners with a declared disability. That represented an increase of two percentage points over the year.

Colleges and universities continue to offer a range of support directly to students with additional support needs, by implementing reasonable adjustments and providing support with exams and assessments. Of course, we and they aspire to do more.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The last time the Government consulted on a review of support for disabled students was in 2019, and since then the landscape has changed. One of the recommendations of that review was that a forum should be established to look at disability-related issues in further and higher education. Is the minister considering setting up such a forum? Will he meet me to discuss that proposal?

Graeme Dey: As the member is aware, we are committed to looking at a range of issues around student support for not only disabled students but all students.

With regard to her point about a forum, I am more than happy to meet her to discuss the issue. It is a reasonable point to make. However, I would be keen to extend the remit of any such forum, if possible, so that it could look at apprenticeships as well.

Forensic Pathologists

3. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what is being done to address the reported shortage of forensic pathologists across Scotland. (S6O-04031)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): There are 14 forensic pathologists in Scotland covering the services required by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in its deaths investigations, and the Crown Office confirms that there have been no significant delays to post-mortems that require a forensic specialist.

There are currently four forensic pathology training posts in Scotland, and the Crown Office is engaged in supporting the Royal College of Pathologists training programmes.

Douglas Lumsden: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I am surprised that the Lord Advocate, who is responsible for the service, is not here to answer the question.

I believe that there are now no forensic pathologists employed in the north-east, which means that agency pathologists are flown into the city of Aberdeen for a day's work. That results in huge costs and long delays for families who are looking for answers. I have also heard of bodies being transferred to other parts of Scotland without the families' knowledge.

How has the Scottish Government allowed this crisis in forensic pathology to happen? What will be done to tackle the inadequate training provision, to train and retain people in Scotland?

Neil Gray: I understand the serious issues that Douglas Lumsden narrates. Pathology services in the north of Scotland were previously provided by the University of Aberdeen. However, NHS Grampian has now taken over the provision of toxicology and histopathology services in that area, and the health board is also working to establish a forensic pathology service.

In the meantime, appropriate forensic pathology coverage is being delivered by locums and other service providers in Scotland. I also point Mr Lumsden to what I said in my earlier answer about the training places that are available. If he requires any further detail, I would be happy to provide that in writing or in a further discussion in a meeting.

Last Night Out Campaign

4. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to the nightclub industry, in light of the Night Time Industries Association's launch of the last night out campaign. (S6O-04032)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): A vibrant, high-value and quality night-time sector is important to our economy. We will continue doing all that we can to support businesses to thrive. We are already freezing the basic property rate in 2024-25 and providing a package of reliefs worth an estimated £685 million, including the small business bonus scheme. That scheme is the most generous relief of its kind in the United Kingdom and we estimate around half of properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors are eligible for 100 per cent relief in 2024-25.

The Deputy First Minister met the Night Time Industries Association on 15 November to discuss the current challenges and solutions, and that engagement will continue.

Meghan Gallacher: More than three UK clubs close every week and there is a danger that all UK nightclubs will close by the end of the decade. During the summer, I met business owner Donald MacLeod at one of my old haunts, the Cathouse rock club, and we spoke about the lack of support that businesses receive to allow our night-time economy to thrive. We mentioned low-emission zones, the lack of public transport, the lack of rates relief for businesses and the decline of towns, high streets and city centres.

The night-time industry is being dismantled brick by brick, so the Government should back the last night out campaign to help support significant nightclubs, such as the Catty. Will the minister save the rave?

Tom Arthur: I commend the member on her excellent taste in nightclubs. I too frequented the Cathouse, and Voodoo before that, when I was younger and had hair as long as the member's. I very much appreciate the sincerity of the points that she makes and I know her personal commitment to the issue as convener of the cross-party group on town centres.

The Government is committed to working constructively with the night-time industry and across hospitality and leisure. Using a range of interventions to support our town and city centres is a priority for the Government, and regulatory and fiscal measures will be set out as part of our tax policy in the budget next week. I am committed to engaging with businesses and would be more than happy to meet the member, or with any other member who wants to work constructively to ensure that our night-time industries are supported.

School Absences (Medical Conditions)

5. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its policies and collaboration with local authorities to ensure that support is provided to pupils who cannot attend school for medical reasons. (S6O-04033)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): When illness leads to children and young people being absent from school for a prolonged period, section 40 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 places a statutory duty on education authorities to make special arrangements for pupils to receive their education elsewhere, such as at home or in hospital.

We have published guidance for local authorities that provides advice on their roles and responsibilities and those of hospitals and other services regarding children who are unable to attend school due to ill health.

Collette Stevenson: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for that update.

I have been contacted by families in East Kilbride who are concerned about the lasting impact of Covid, particularly around mental health, on children and young people, some of whom have not been able to attend school regularly.

What consideration has been given to sharing best practice across the country on integrating pupils back into school after absence due to ill health? What work is under way to support parents, guardians and teachers to put mixed-model learning into action where that would be appropriate in ensuring that young people can achieve their full potential?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important issue. She will be aware that additional Government support was provided to local authorities during the pandemic to help young people make the transition back to formal education. The on-going effects of the pandemic remain acute in some schools.

We are considering a review and update of the guidance that I alluded to in my original answer. The member also spoke about the hugely important role of parents. We are already rolling out a new approach to support for parents across the country, and I will take the issue that she raises back to officials in order to consider what more we might be able to do on the specific issues of Covid and how to facilitate post-pandemic support.

Cross Border Connection

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the cross border connection proposals for the Scottish Borders. (S6O-04034)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The regulation of electricity networks is reserved to the United Kingdom Government. Scottish ministers have devolved responsibility for determining applications for consent under the Electricity Act 1989. Given that, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual infrastructure projects that may come forward as I may not interfere with or prejudice any decisions that may come before the Scottish ministers for determination.

In general, however, the Scottish Government recognises that the expansion of the electricity grid will play a crucial role in delivering on our energy ambitions and maximising the economic opportunities of Scotland's abundant renewable resources.

Rachael Hamilton: Borders residents are inundated with energy developments, and communities now face more than 75km of pylons stretching right through the Scottish Borders. In the coming weeks, I will chair a virtual village hall meeting to give locals a chance to voice their legitimate concerns directly to Scottish Power. Will the Scottish Government stand with residents and ensure that no plans proceed against the will of local communities in the Scottish Borders?

Alasdair Allan: The national planning framework makes it clear that potential impacts on communities—the member alluded to them, although, as I said, I cannot comment on the specific case—and on nature and heritage, including the cumulative effects of developments, are important considerations in the decision-making process. She will forgive me: if I read the question correctly and there was an invitation in it, the ministerial code prevents me from commenting. However, I thank her for her question.

Budget 2025-26 (Consultation)

7. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what consultations it has held with businesses in advance of its 2025-26 budget. (S6O-04035)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government has had a wide range of engagement at ministerial and official levels to inform budget choices across all portfolios. That has included engaging with a number of business representative organisations and sector bodies, and consideration of written representations that have been received.

Jeremy Balfour: The Scottish National Party Government does not understand business. That is not my view, but the view of businesses across Scotland that feel the damage that has been caused by years of SNP tax rises and anti-business regulations. If we want the Scottish economy to grow, we have to support our businesses in that endeavour. My party wants to reverse the tide of rising taxes, starting with a fully costed plan to give pubs and restaurant businesses across Scotland full rates relief for one year. Will the cabinet secretary finally listen and do something positive for business in Scotland?

Shona Robison: I do not accept Jeremy Balfour's characterisation of that at all, because a number of measures in the current budget already benefit businesses and properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, including the freeze of the basic property rate and the most generous small business bonus relief in the United Kingdom. We estimate that around half of properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will be eligible

for 100 per cent relief in 2024-25. Decisions on non-domestic rates and reliefs for the 2025-26 budget will be considered in the context of the budget announcement next Wednesday.

United Kingdom Budget (Taxes)

8. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on Scotland's finances, how much it estimates will be raised in increased taxes in Scotland in 2025-26 as a result of the UK autumn budget. (S6O-04036)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Scotland faces more than £2 billion in higher taxes next year as a result of the UK Government's autumn budget, which is largely driven by higher employer national insurance contributions. The impact of the employer national insurance contribution increases in Scotland is estimated to be around £750 million for the public sector and the wider sectors that are contracted to provide and support public services, such as general practitioners, social care providers and early learning and childcare providers. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that the third sector faces costs of around £75 million. The remainder of the employer national insurance contributions increase will be borne by businesses across Scotland and will pose a serious challenge to many organisations and businesses.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to Mr Kidd's supplementary question, I note that a number of conversations are going on across the chamber. I would be grateful if those could end.

Bill Kidd: As the cabinet secretary said, a significant proportion of the higher taxes that we are talking about come down to Labour's decision to increase national insurance contributions. It is of deep concern that the UK Government now appears to be briefing that it will not cover the full cost of the national insurance increase to Scotland's public sector, which could cost our public services hundreds of millions of pounds and who knows how many jobs. Can the cabinet secretary provide any update regarding what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the impact that that short-sighted Labour decision could have on our public services?

Shona Robison: If the amounts that were reported this week are all that is provided, that will mean that the chancellor will short-change services that the public depend on by more than £400 million. That is a direct impact on GPs, social care, colleges, early learning and childcare, to name just a few. The UK Labour Government still has time to fix that, by confirming that the full cost to the delivery of public services of its national insurance increase will be reimbursed. We will

pursue the UK Labour Government rigorously on that point.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Justice (Victims)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):

Claire Inglis was tortured and murdered in the home that she shared with her young son. Her killer had been bailed from court five times, despite dozens of convictions. Social services tried but failed to warn Claire that she was in danger.

Claire's parents, Fiona and Ian, are still fighting for answers. I have previously raised their plight directly with the First Minister, and with his predecessor. Claire's parents say:

"We should not have to come to parliament again, and on the third anniversary of our beloved daughter's murder, to beg the First Minister for answers.

We feel trapped and unable to move on because we continue to be deprived of basic but vital information."

Will the First Minister tell Fiona and Ian how much longer they must wait for the answers that they deserve?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express to Fiona and Ian my deepest sympathies over the loss of their beloved daughter. I cannot imagine the pain, suffering and agony that they have endured.

Mr Findlay is correct: he has raised the issue with me previously. He and I have exchanged correspondence on the issue. As a consequence of that, we in the Government have taken steps to ask Stirling Council to undertake a further examination and exploration of the issues that are involved, and to engage directly with Claire's parents. Obviously, we will discuss those issues in this exchange. I remain committed to making sure that the family receives the answers that they, understandably, deserve.

Russell Findlay: When I wrote to Mr Swinney on behalf of Claire's parents, he told me that he would reply "soon". That was four months ago. Is that really good enough?

The Inglis family are far from alone in being failed by the justice system. Also in the chamber today is Denise Clair, who was raped by David Goodwillie and David Robertson. No credible explanation has ever been given for why the Crown Office did not prosecute. Frankly, the case stinks. Denise was forced to take civil action against the two men, and a judge agreed that she had been raped. She has since asked the Government to fund a private criminal prosecution, but she continues to be left in limbo.

Denise has suffered for 13 long years. Here is her question to the First Minister: will your Government do the right thing and support such a prosecution?

The First Minister: I have engaged with Mr Findlay on the case of Claire Inglis, and we have made the request of Stirling Council to provide the satisfactory investigation that is required. However, in light of the exchanges that we have had today, I will look again at that issue, to determine whether there is further pressure that we need to apply for Stirling Council to do exactly that.

Denise Clair has pursued her case through a civil action, and the court has come to its judgment on that question. I am aware that she has made an application for legal aid assistance to take forward—forgive me. She has approached ministers to take the steps that are necessary to ensure that her case can be pursued as a private prosecution, and the issue is being considered by the Government.

However, I say to Mr Findlay that the Government has taken too long to consider the request that Ms Clair has made of us. When I saw the news reports at the weekend, I asked for greater urgency to be given to engagement with her agents on that question, because I am dissatisfied with how long it has taken. Through Mr Findlay, I express my apology to Ms Clair today.

Russell Findlay: I am sure that Denise Clair will be pleased to hear that. As Thomas Ross KC said,

"There is nothing complicated or complex about this decision."

We have the family of a murder victim with no answers, and we have a double rape victim who has no answers. That is typical of how victims are treated because of the Scottish National Party's weak justice agenda.

The First Minister often cites judicial independence, but just this week, he subverted judicial independence. Two days ago, John Swinney and his colleagues sat there and applauded themselves for passing a bad law to free thousands of criminals early from Scotland's prisons. That will result in more crime, more victims and more pressure on our police. Crucially, the SNP's new law does not give prison governors the power to block the release of those who are considered to be too dangerous. Why not?

The First Minister: I understand the significance of the cases that Mr Findlay puts to me today, but there are some fundamental points that I need to put on the record about them. The granting of bail in the Claire Inglis case was an independent judgment that was arrived at by the courts. It is wrong for ministers to be involved in

those cases. I accept that there will be vigorous debate about the appropriateness of judgments, but those decisions are taken by the independent judiciary, and none of us wants to have a judiciary that is anything other than independent.

In the case of Denise Clair, a judgment was arrived at by the Crown, which independently assessed the case for prosecution. Again—and I know that Mr Findlay would not be arguing for this—nobody accepts that those decisions should be taken by a process that is anything other than independent.

In relation to the legislation that the Parliament has passed, Mr Findlay knows that the Government has had to take that step because of the significant rise in the prison population, requiring ministers to ensure that our prisons are safe, especially for prison officers to work in. The reason why there is no governor's veto is that the Government has amended the timescale under which individuals will be released from prison, but we have put in significant safeguards to ensure that those who are convicted of domestic violence and serious assaults are not included in the release scheme that we have put in place.

Russell Findlay: When the SNP previously ordered the mass early release of prisoners, the governor's veto was a vital safeguard, but John Swinney now thinks that he knows better than Scotland's prison governors. People in the real world are looking at this in utter disbelief. Soft-touch SNP justice prioritises the rights and interests of dangerous criminals.

Claire's mum, Fiona, told me:

"There is something far wrong with Scotland's justice system when victims are kept in the dark and not treated as a priority."

When it is about releasing prisoners, the SNP rushes through a law in days. When it is about justice for victims, it leaves them waiting for years. Does John Swinney have any regrets about his Government's treatment of crime victims?

The First Minister: I will always take seriously the concerns of victims and will take the necessary action to ensure that the interests of victims are fully and properly taken into account in all the steps that the Government takes.

I point out that, in relation to the early release schemes that have been put in place previously, there have been opportunities for victims to be fully advised about the circumstances of release through the victim notification scheme, should they wish to take up that opportunity, which is not always the case.

I will correct one of the points that I made in my earlier answer. I should have made reference to

sexual assault as being an offence for which constraints are applied in the legislation.

I do not think that Mr Findlay's characterisation of mass early release is at all appropriate. The Government took steps to ensure that our prison system is safe for those who work in it, just as Mr Findlay's colleagues in the then United Kingdom Government did. The difference is that this Government came to Parliament, set out its case and asked for parliamentary consent to the steps that the Government was taking. That is what we do in a democracy.

National Health Service

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Yesterday, the Institute for Fiscal Studies published a devastating report on the state of Scotland's national health service under the Scottish National Party. It says:

"Performance in the Scottish NHS remains below pre-pandemic levels across many measures. Even more concerning, many measures of performance have continued to worsen over the last year."

Most damning, it points out that, although the NHS in Scotland has proportionally higher spending and more staff, recovery in Scotland's health service is lagging behind that of the NHS in England on every measure. Does John Swinney accept that SNP incompetence and mismanagement are bad for Scotland's health?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The NHS in Scotland relies on the commitment and contribution of thousands of members of staff the length and breadth of the country, and I record my thanks to them for the work that they put in to ensure that we are well cared for in the national health service.

The NHS is recovering from the Covid pandemic, and we are making progress in that respect. We know that more work has to be done, but information that is available shows that there have been improvements in the latest quarter, with reductions in the length of the waiting lists for diagnostics and in-patient and day-case activity, as well as an improvement in cancer performance.

I accept that work remains to be done to improve the performance of the national health service, but the Government is putting in the investment and maintaining the focus to enable that to happen.

Anas Sarwar: It is not just patients who are being failed; it is staff, too, so they will not take kindly to being used as human shields in the SNP Government's defence.

John Swinney can try to spin the facts all he likes, but the devastating incompetence of the SNP is clear to see. Towards the end of his

answer, he focused on inputs, but the Government needs to focus on outcomes, because, on Tuesday, it was revealed that the number of patients who have been stuck on an NHS waiting list for more than a year has now risen to more than 100,000. There are now more than 863,000 patients on an NHS waiting list, which is equivalent to one in six Scots. At the same time, we are carrying out 50,000 fewer operations compared with pre-pandemic levels, and delayed discharge has soared.

When will John Swinney stop defending the indefensible, admit that his SNP Government has failed and change direction?

The First Minister: I think that members of the national health service workforce will welcome the investment that the Government has made to ensure that NHS staffing has gone up by 26 per cent in the period between when this Government came to office and now. In cancer care, for example, the consultant oncologist workforce has increased by 50.4 per cent over the past 10 years.

The Government is investing in our NHS staff and, into the bargain, we have put in place pay settlements that have meant that we have not had to suffer and endure industrial action in the NHS in Scotland.

I point out to Mr Sarwar that, at the end of September, the number of patient waits for one of the eight key diagnostic tests showed a decrease of 7.4 per cent. The most recent data also shows that 73.2 per cent of patients were treated on time, within the 62-day cancer waiting time target, which is higher than the figure in the previous quarter.

I am the first to acknowledge that we have challenges in recovering from the Covid pandemic, but the Government is making the investment and the interventions to ensure that our national health service performs in a fashion that meets the needs of the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: That answer again demonstrates that the First Minister has his head in the sand. The IFS makes the point that we have disproportionately higher spending and more staff in Scotland, but our performance is poorer than England's. That points not to staff being wrong or resources being wrong but to a failure of leadership and a failure of the Government.

The uncomfortable reality for John Swinney is that no public service in Scotland is safe from SNP incompetence. On his watch, our NHS has plunged into a doom loop of soaring waiting lists and poorer health outcomes; our schools, which were once the envy of the world, have seen collapsing standards and rising violence; our prisons are left in tatters, with prisoners being let out early because of mismanagement of our criminal justice system; and our housing sector is

in disarray, with soaring homelessness numbers and spiralling rents.

The fact is that, after 17 years of the SNP, every institution in Scotland is weaker. How many people have to lose their lives, how many patients have to go private, how many people have to be trapped in hospital and how many staff have to be pushed to breaking point before John Swinney accepts that he and his Government have failed and that Scotland needs a new direction?

The First Minister: On a range of policies, the Government is delivering the progress that people in Scotland require. In the face of 14 years of austerity from the Conservative Government on housing, the Scottish Government has built more affordable houses per head of population than have been built in England or Wales—and more than were built when the Labour Party was in government in Scotland—in the face of Tory austerity from London.

If Mr Sarwar believes that the solution to all our problems in Scotland is the election of a Labour Government, I ask him to have a conversation with pensioners in Scotland. In the first few months of a Labour Government, pensioners in this country have been betrayed by that Labour Government, which promised change, but all it did was slash financial support for pensioners in our country by cutting winter fuel payments. If that is what change means, Scotland does not need change; it needs progress under an SNP Government.

Fossil Fuel Transition

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): World leaders have once again failed to make progress at the global climate conference. They all know the urgent need to transition away from fossil fuels, and the public gets it, too. Polling from the think tank Uplift shows that, in Scotland, most business leaders back the transition to a fossil-free energy system. However, the Scottish Government has still not published or set out the new energy strategy that is supposed to shift Scotland away from fossil fuels. It is still sitting on the First Minister's desk, nearly two years after the draft was published. Scotland needs clarity, our renewables industry and the energy workforce need clarity, and the Parliament needs to see the strategy, too, so that we can see whether the Scottish Government is providing proper funding. Will the First Minister finally end the delay and publish the strategy before next week's budget?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government's direction on energy policy and renewables is crystal clear. That was demonstrated by the Government's publication of the green industrial strategy, which gives all the certainty in the world about the Government's devotion and dedication to making the transition to

a green economy through the support of renewable energy in Scotland. Mr Harvie knows that, since 1990, we have halved our emissions in Scotland, we have effectively decarbonised our electricity networks, and we are making the investments to enable us to deliver the transition to net zero. All those themes will be reflected in the Government's budget next week.

Mr Harvie will know that some of the judgments and issues within the energy strategy are informed and influenced by recent court decisions. The Government is taking time to ensure that we properly reflect on those issues as we formulate the energy strategy, which will be published when those conclusions have been reached.

Patrick Harvie: The lack of the strategy does not bring the clarity that the First Minister is claiming exists. He tells us again that his priorities include tackling the climate emergency. Driving down transport emissions will be a key part of achieving that. That is why, during our time in government, the Scottish Greens cut the cost of public transport by providing free bus travel for under-22s and scrapping peak-time rail fares. We know that cutting fares is critical to driving up public transport use while driving down emissions. Instead of continuing that work, however, the First Minister has brought back peak rail fares, which has undermined climate action and increased the cost of living.

The Scottish Greens have now set out plans for a national bus fare cap to ensure that nobody pays more than £2 for their regular bus journey. Can the First Minister see that public transport costs need to come down, and will he commit now to making that plan happen?

The First Minister: The Government has delivered reductions in the cost of travel for many people in Scotland, not least under-22s, who now enjoy free bus travel around the country. That is a very welcome development and a step that assists young people's mobility and supports their involvement in our society.

We have taken steps on peak fares. We extended the pilot exercise to establish whether there was an evidence base to demonstrate that the pilot sufficiently justified the investment of public money to meet our climate objectives. Unfortunately, the results of the pilot exercise did not justify the public investment. As Mr Harvie knows, the financial pressures on the Government are such that we have to be very careful about the judgments that we make. We will reflect on all those questions as we consider the Government's budget and take the necessary steps to achieve our objectives on net zero.

Employer National Insurance Contributions

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the United Kingdom Government's reported allocation of between £295 million and £330 million to cover the increase in employer national insurance contributions for the public sector in Scotland. (S6F-03592)

The First Minister (John Swinney): If the figures that were reported this week are all that will be provided, that would mean that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be short-changing services that the public depend on by more than £400 million.

Kenneth Gibson: In evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on Tuesday, the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed that Labour's national insurance hike will mean that employees will be £800 a year worse off as a direct result of Labour's budget, with low-paid workers disproportionately impacted. Business investment will fall by £25 billion, and taxes are projected to rise by £62.2 billion per year by 2029-30. The UK economy will continue to stagnate, growing by only 4.3 per cent between 2019 and 2028. Does the First Minister agree that, if that is what a Labour Government looks like, independence cannot come soon enough?

The First Minister: Mr Gibson knows the economic damage that has been done to the country by one of the biggest decisions that was taken as part of the United Kingdom—the decision about Brexit. That has inflicted significant economic damage on the Scottish economy, which is one of the arguments for independence, because with it we would be able to resume our participation in the European Union.

The change in employer national insurance contributions is an indication of the fact that the United Kingdom's public finances are in such a weak position that action of that type must be taken. However, it is also damaging the Scottish economy, because of the financial burden that it places on public services, businesses and organisations that we depend on. As things stand, people and organisations such as general practitioners, social care providers, colleges and early learning and childcare practitioners do not appear to be being compensated by the United Kingdom Government. Mr Gibson is absolutely right to point out the damage that is being done to the Scottish economy by those measures. Independence cannot come soon enough to address the issues.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): It is good to see that the First Minister has not changed the record. The Scottish National Party made a policy decision to have a larger civil service in Scotland

and to pay public sector workers more, despite failing to deliver meaningful public sector reform. Is the blame for the national insurance cash crisis that the SNP Government now faces not down to the economic incompetence of both Governments: that of the SNP, for the public sector to become too big, and of Labour, for using national insurance as a means to claw back the vast amounts of money—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: —that it had committed to above-inflation pay increases in the public sector?

The First Minister: Every day that I am First Minister is a day when I learn something new.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): You need to learn a lot more.

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, if I may stop you. I would be very grateful if members ceased commenting from a sedentary position. If you have not been called to speak, please do not speak.

The First Minister: My new piece of learning today is that Craig Hoy, a Conservative, has decided that it is a good idea to come to the Parliament and lecture me about economic incompetence after what his Government inflicted on the people of the United Kingdom.

I cannot remember, so I may be saying something that is not backed up by fact, but I know that Mr Findlay was a great supporter of Liz Truss, and I suspect that Craig Hoy was, too—there were tons of them on that side of the chamber—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Craig Hoy: That is not true.

The First Minister: Oh—so Craig Hoy was not a supporter of Liz Truss. He was probably a supporter of one of the other economic incompetents in the Tories who damaged our economy.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Does the First Minister recognise that the very reason that Scotland is receiving an unprecedented additional £5 billion in the budget is because the UK Labour Government has taken tough decisions to raise additional revenue? What would the First Minister say—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: What would the First Minister say to the Office for Budget Responsibility, given what it told the Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee this week? The OBR said that, without the necessary tax changes, Governments would

“see your debts rise”

and rise

“for ever”,

and that

“Governments cannot provide ... more and more public services as a share of the economy”

and not pay for them

“without seeing their debts reach an unsustainable level.”

The First Minister: I am grateful to Mr Marra for putting those comments on the record; I am sure that the Office for Budget Responsibility said other things that were possibly not quite as convenient for Mr Marra's narrative as the ones that he has selected today.

I say to Mr Marra that we are about to go through a process in which we are all going to have to make a contribution to deciding what is allocated to different policy areas in Scotland. Mr Marra and all his colleagues on the Labour side of the chamber are not innocent bystanders in that process. They can act to assist and support the Scottish—

Michael Marra: There is £5 billion—

The First Minister: I am not sure that Mr Marra is interested in listening to my answer, given the way that he is shouting at me.

All that I would say to Mr Marra is this: if he wishes to see the resources that have been allocated as part of the United Kingdom budget process spent in Scotland, this Parliament has to pass a budget, and the responsibility is on Mr Marra to vote for the Government's budget.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): It is reported that the rise in national insurance contributions for employers will overwhelm the finances of charities such as the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which will face an estimated increased cost of £400,000 per annum—that is twice the cost of feeding all the animals in its care. I declare an interest as an SSPCA member. Have there been any discussions with the UK Government on the financial damage to the charitable sector in Scotland? Organisations such as the SSPCA cannot pass those costs on to anybody, so they must cut what they deliver.

The First Minister: I fear—well, I do not fear; I know—that the situation that Christine Grahame warns of in Parliament today is testing many charities and third sector organisations the length and breadth of the country. They have seen—or they will see, at the start of April—an overnight increase in their costs, without the revenue to support their activities.

Organisations such as the SSPCA, in the example that Christine Grahame puts to me—I know that she cares deeply about that organisation, given her commitment to animal welfare issues—will be facing difficulties, and I know that representations have been made to the United Kingdom Government in that respect.

From a Scottish Government perspective, I am concerned that organisations on which we depend to deliver services in Scotland will not be assisted by the changes that have been made.

Temporary Accommodation (Children)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to reduce the length of time that children are placed in temporary accommodation. (S6F-03572)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Additional investment of £42 million in affordable housing this year has been targeted to five local authorities with sustained temporary accommodation pressures. That funding is to increase the supply of social and affordable homes, including larger properties that are suitable for families, through acquisitions and bringing empty social homes back into use.

That is in addition to the record funding of more than £14 billion that the Government is allocating to local authorities to deliver a range of services, including homelessness services.

Meghan Gallacher: In 2008, 9,535 people were living in temporary accommodation. In 2024, 16,330 people are living in temporary accommodation. This Government is presiding over disgraceful waits in temporary housing. One of the most appalling cases involved a child spending more than seven years in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh, with another person spending close to 2,900 days without a permanent home.

The Scottish National Party has been in power for 17 years, yet things go from bad to worse. Does the First Minister believe that a child should spend seven years in temporary accommodation? When will the Government finally get a grip of the situation, which should shame the First Minister and his Government?

The First Minister: As I set out in my answer to Anas Sarwar earlier on, in the face of 14 years of Conservative austerity, this Government has built an average of 7,750 affordable homes each year since 2007. That is an average of 40 per cent more per annum than in the period 1999 to 2007. It is 45 per cent more affordable homes delivered per head of population than in England, and 70 per cent more than in Wales, during a period of

intense austerity from the Conservative Government.

I do not want people to be living in temporary accommodation. That is why the Government is taking steps to improve the availability of rented accommodation. That will be part of the Housing (Scotland) Bill that Parliament will consider this afternoon, and I hope that Parliament will support the Government in the measures that we are bringing forward to strengthen and expand housing stock in Scotland.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister for what reason at least 69,000 patients reportedly waited more than an hour to be triaged in A and E departments in the first half of this year. (S6F-03591)

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important for me to stress that, for people who are seriously unwell or whose condition is life threatening, initial triage will have been started by paramedics before they arrive at hospital, with accident and emergency staff put on standby for the patient's arrival for an immediate further assessment.

Nonetheless, any unnecessary delay is not acceptable, and we are working with national health service boards, through our improvement programme, to reduce delays at every part in the patient journey, in order to minimise risk and improve patient outcomes.

Jackie Baillie: As the First Minister knows, the reality is that the longer that people are forced to wait for that initial assessment, the greater the chance that their condition deteriorates.

That speaks to the bigger problem in our NHS. Dr Fiona Hunter, from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine in Scotland, said:

“Long waits for triage are yet another indicator of a system which is not functioning as it should.”

The Institute for Fiscal Studies report demonstrated clearly that the NHS in Scotland is underperforming, despite the hard work of the staff.

The First Minister is not an innocent bystander. After 17 years in power, does he accept that his Government is failing our NHS, our hard-working NHS staff and the patients in Scotland?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie will know that performance on four-hour waits across the whole country, in accident and emergency departments the length and breadth of Scotland, is better than it is in other parts of the United Kingdom. It is not good enough and it is not where it should be, but it is better than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We have to focus on some of the practical issues that affect that performance. Some of it is about the demonstration of demand because we are dealing with an increasingly frail population that has been made more frail by the consequences of the Covid pandemic.

We are also dealing with acute and intense activity in our hospital estate, which is why the Government is putting such an effort into reducing delayed discharge to ensure that we free up the opportunity for patients to make the journey through hospital care and return to their homes where that is possible.

Those are the practical interventions that the Government is making to address the situation and ensure that in our accident and emergency system the initial assessment of patient condition can be undertaken as speedily and effectively as possible.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions. If we are all concise, we will be able to fit more members in.

Just Transition (North-east Scotland)

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): New research from PwC confirms that Scotland is leading the United Kingdom in the creation of green jobs, with the number tripling since 2021. That comes despite the news that Labour's big plans to create green jobs, with the promised 1,000 GB energy jobs in the north-east, are now watered down to around 200 to 300 posts based in Aberdeen. What steps is the Scottish National Party Scottish Government taking to deliver a just transition for the north-east, as opposed to the empty promises that we are hearing from the UK Government?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is committed to facilitating a just transition for the north-east of Scotland. Through the just transition fund, we have committed to more than £500 million of investment to support that journey by maintaining and creating jobs in low-carbon industries and contributing to the region's future prosperity. We have dedicated £11 million for a package of skills interventions, including the energy skills transition hub, and we have allocated more than £75 million to help projects and communities across the north-east, including Moray, to create jobs, support innovation and secure the highly skilled workforce for the future.

Farmers

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I quickly remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a farmer.

Today, the NFUS has gathered hundreds of farmers from across Scotland outside of Parliament. Thousands more will be watching from all our constituencies across Scotland. Whether it is due to Labour's cruel family farm tax, the lost or stolen Bew review money, or the lack of commitment from this Scottish National Party Government over multi-annual funding, farmers are worried about the future. They are worried about their own future, their children's future and their businesses. All eyes are on Scotland for the budget. What reassurances will the First Minister give to all those farmers standing outside today?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not think that Mr Eagle helps the farming industry—*[Interruption.]*

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): He is a farmer.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I do not think that Mr Eagle helps the farming industry by using language such as "lost or stolen" money. What language is that for a member of Parliament to use? *[Interruption.]* I have given a cast-iron commitment that the £46 million will be put into the rural affairs budget of the Scottish Government so that farmers can appreciate that investment. That is a commitment from me, and Mr Eagle should take it seriously.

I am deeply troubled by what is happening as a result of the inheritance tax changes. I represent a large rural constituency, with many people involved in farming. The inheritance tax changes will be catastrophic for the sustainability of family farming. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands have both written to the United Kingdom Government to point out some of the issues that it has skated past in its rush to put in place those provisions, which will be deeply damaging to the farming industry.

For Mr Eagle to put any point to me about multi-annual funding, when the Conservative Government failed to deliver that and inflicted the shambles of Brexit on the farming industry in Scotland, is an absolute joke.

People with Learning Difficulties (Health Checks)

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Last week it was reported that, despite the Government handing at least £4 million to health boards since 2022 to deliver health checks for vulnerable Scots who have a learning disability, and promising that those would be completed by March 2023, as of this year, not a single board has met that target, and some boards have offered no checks at all. This week, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil

Justice Committee was told by individuals who have a learning disability that they feel that they “remain unheard” and that they are

“not a priority for Scotland”.

What has happened to the £4 million that was given to health boards for an unfulfilled promise, what will be done to rectify that failure and will the first minister now apologise to those vulnerable Scots with learning disabilities who have been let down by his Government yet again?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not familiar with the issue that Mr O’Kane has put to me today. If we have allocated £4 million to health boards, I would expect them to have followed up, delivered and applied that. I will investigate that in the light of today’s exchanges and reply in full to Mr O’Kane.

16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence Campaign

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): This week marks the beginning of the global 16 days of activism campaign to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls, which is key to creating a society where women and girls can live safely. With that in mind, what action is the Government taking to reduce violence against women and girls.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the question from Karen Adam. I had the privilege on Friday of launching the 16 days of activism on violence against women and girls in Perth, my home city, and to committing, as a local member of Parliament and as First Minister, to taking the necessary action to address this totally unacceptable curse in our society. What has to change is the behaviour and attitudes of men, and I commit in this Parliament to giving the leadership necessary to ensure that that is the case. Across Government, the work that we take forward in our equally safe strategy is the focal point for our interventions to ensure that this scourge is addressed.

Road Safety (Speed Limit and Dualling)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The well-known road safety campaigner Neil Greig says that the Scottish Government’s proposal to cut the single-carriageway speed limit from 60mph to 50mph is

“a cheap gimmick that would do little to reduce death and injury”.

Those are his words, not mine. What it would do is increase journey times and costs for many rural road users, including those who use key routes such as the A9 and the A96. Instead of going down that route, why does the Scottish

Government not improve road safety by finally delivering on its promise to fully dual the A9 and the A96?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government remains committed to the dualling of the A9 and the A96—[*Interruption.*]—

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —and is taking practical steps to advance those projects.

On the question of road speed, a consultation is under way. The reason why we are having a consultation is that there are different opinions about how best to tackle the issue. I am regularly pressed, as is the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, on the number of fatalities and accidents on our roads. We would be neglecting our duty if we did not examine what options are possible to address that situation.

I hear the comments that Mr Fraser puts on the record from an individual whom I know well and who contributes significantly on the subject. However, if members of Parliament want us to address the issue of fatalities on our roads, we have to explore what the options are for doing that. That is what the Government is doing.

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Highlands and Islands)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Scottish Human Rights Commission’s report “Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands” makes desperate reading. It states that “urgent action is needed” to ensure access to healthcare and

“to eradicate rooflessness and hunger”

in the region, yet the Scottish Government has shelved its proposed human rights bill. Will the First Minister work with me to progress my member’s bill to enshrine the right to food in Scots law, in a bid to start addressing the report’s findings?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government will, of course, engage with Rhoda Grant on her legislative proposal in relation to the needs of individuals in rural and island communities, especially in the Highlands and Islands. The Government takes forward a range of interventions in healthcare, in transportation and in other aspects of public services that are designed to address the challenges that the Scottish Human Rights Commission’s report sets out. That will remain the Government’s focus as we take forward our programme of interventions in Scotland.

Child Poverty

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):

The latest figures from Social Security Scotland show that, since their launch, the Scottish Government's five family payments have paid more than £1 billion to families across Scotland to help to end child poverty. Meanwhile, the Labour United Kingdom Government at Westminster is maintaining the cruel two-child cap, which has forced thousands more children into poverty since Labour came to office, including in my Dundee City West constituency. Can the First Minister say more about the actions that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle poverty against the backdrop of disastrous Westminster policy making?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Modelling that was published in February estimated that Scottish Government policies would keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. An estimated 60,000 children would be kept out of relative poverty through investment in our Scottish child payment alone. Our five family payments are providing financial support to families that could be worth around £25,000 by the time an eligible child turns 16, compared with less than £2,000 south of the border.

I am deeply concerned that the two-child limit remains part of the welfare system in the United Kingdom. I am stunned that an incoming Labour Government has not removed that anachronism from the welfare system, because it is condemning more and more children to live in poverty. One of the first actions of a Labour Government should have been to remove that cap.

Dental Services (Shetland)

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):

Two thousand patients of the Lerwick dental practice have been notified by text that they will be deregistered and left without care by early next year. Another 4,000 patients are at risk of deregistration. Just this morning, I heard from a constituent who is one of those 2,000 patients, who says:

"I am in tremendous pain with toothache. On phoning the dentist for emergency treatment, as this is all I can access now, I eventually got through, only to be told they would see what they could do and phone me back."

She is still waiting for the call back.

It is clear that the independent, high street model of dentistry is failing national health service patients—disproportionately so in Shetland, where there is no alternative. Talk of long-term strategies does little to ease the agony for patients with toothache. Does the Scottish Government agree that everyone in Scotland should be able to access routine NHS dental care? If so, will the

First Minister ensure that the model of delivery is re-examined, as the current system is quite clearly failing my constituents in Shetland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have been briefed by officials on the developing situation in Shetland, and I understand that they have met the board to discuss the issue as a matter of urgency. The latest news is undoubtedly a regressive step, and the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health will be overseeing through officials that appropriate mitigations are in place to ensure that the legitimate aspirations that Beatrice Wishart has put to me are fulfilled for her constituents in the Shetland Islands. The issue will have the focused attention of the public health minister, who will be happy to engage with Ms Wishart on the question.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions. There will now be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Tweeddale Youth Action (25th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We will move to the next item of business. I ask our guests who are leaving the public gallery to do so quickly and quietly—thank you very much for your co-operation.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14645, in the name of Christine Grahame, on 25 years of Tweeddale Youth Action. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Tweeddale Youth Action (TYA) on celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2024; notes that TYA, based in Peebles, provides a range of services to local young people, in addition to youth club drop-ins, excursions and holiday programmes, and also running the innovative Food Punks and Bike Punks initiatives; understands that Food Punks, a catering enterprise providing training to young people, has recently secured its first permanent premises on Peebles High Street, where it hopes to open a pizza shop, which will provide further hospitality training and employment opportunities for young people; further understands that Bike Punks also continues to go from strength to strength, with a workshop based in Innerleithen, tying in to the strong mountain biking presence in the area, which provides training on welding and repairing bicycles; believes that TYA has shown a genuinely innovative approach to improving the lives of local young people over its 25 years, which would not have been possible without the continuing hard work of the team of dedicated TYA staff, volunteers and trustees; wishes everyone involved the very best for the future, and recognises the contribution of youth work across Scotland in improving outcomes for young people.

12:48

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank all members who signed my motion, which allowed the debate to proceed.

We all know that young people inhabit an increasingly complex world and that Covid lockdowns have had a profound effect on their growth and development, as well as on their hopes and fears for the future. Ever easier access to drugs and alcohol has led to increased experimentation, which is starting at younger and younger ages. As that is coupled with often unrestricted access to the internet and the pressures of social media, youth wellbeing is probably at an all-time low.

As the world around us becomes more polarised, young people need safe spaces to

socialise, meet new people and hear new perspectives to challenge and be challenged on their views and behaviour. That is where youth work can be a powerful force for good in the lives of our young people and communities.

One such youth work organisation, Tweeddale Youth Action—which I will call TYA—has just celebrated 25 years of working with Tweeddale's young people. Through its committed talented staff team, led by localities manager Dave Hodson, the organisation delivers a fantastic range of youth work services and opportunities for young people in Peebles, Innerleithen and the surrounding areas.

Its activities include drop-ins, which provide casual and commitment-free access to young people and give them the confidence to come in to see what TYA is all about. The drop-ins, which are held on Mondays and Thursdays in Innerleithen and on Wednesdays and Fridays in Peebles, are crucial in beginning to build those essential trusting relationships, which, for some young people, might be the only positive adult relationships that they experience. A variety of activities are on offer, including the usual—table tennis and pool—as well as access to free food at the youth club, which continues to be important to young people who attend. Many of our young people are hungry and, for some, TYA helps to fill a poverty gap, particularly during school holidays.

There is the bike punks project. TYA continues to develop its facilities at Innerleithen, with the workshop being put to great use to provide learning opportunities to weld and repair bicycles under the bike punks brand. With Innerleithen being a centre of excellence in the mountain biking industry, the project continues to grow. That is definitely an area where TYA wants to expand in the future in order to teach skills that local employers need and value, particularly as the Tweed valley becomes increasingly well known for cycling.

We move on to more punks—food punks. There have been exciting developments in Peebles, where the food punks project, led by Stuart Clink, has opened a fast-food pizza shop on the High Street. The project pizza training academy and pizzeria is an ambitious and challenging project that is not without risk, but TYA feels that the rewards are justified to allow young people to develop skills that can be used in the hospitality industry through exposure to real-life catering, real people and real business, because nothing beats learning on the job. In a supportive environment, the experience helps the young people who are involved to achieve and exceed their goals. In time, it is hoped that the skills that are learned in the shop will lead to formal qualifications for all

those who are being trained by the talented food punks team.

The shop on Peebles High Street comes after years of the food punks project delivering a wide array of outside and event catering, with different food offerings and very little repetition. In itself, that has been great, but it did not allow for the repetition that helps to consolidate young people's skills. Project pizza has helped to narrow the focus and, more importantly, it has provided a platform to teach and help young people to refine their skills.

TYA takes young people out and about—making friends, strengthening existing friendships, breaking down barriers and being open to new ideas and experiences, which can make a huge difference to a young person's outlook. Through TYA's Easter, summer and Christmas holiday programmes and trips away, the staff continue to see increased confidence, self-esteem and aspirations among the young people, as well as reduced anxiety, loneliness and isolation. That is just as a result of going on trips, including to theme parks, beaches, art galleries and museums, city trips to Edinburgh and Glasgow and attending the Youth Beatz music festival.

It is not rocket science; it is hands-on and practical. It is about belonging, having an identity and seeing that there is reason to be optimistic and hopeful for the future. If young people do not get that through positive experience, they might find it through other means that are not good for them.

The Borders-wide stepping stones project is another example. TYA continues to provide one-to-one support through that very successful programme, which targets individuals who require additional help to achieve their full potential. It is a partnership youth work project with YouthBorders that is aimed at improving the emotional wellbeing and life chances of young people aged 10 to 18. The project works alongside schools, social work and other youth and community-based organisations to ensure that support is focused on those who need it most.

Comments from young people who have taken part in stepping stones show that it increased their ability to express their point of view with other people, that they know where to go to access trusted information to make informed choices, that their confidence increased and that they consider the potential risks before making choices about where to go and what to do.

All that is done by TYA under the guidance and presence of the excellent Dave Hodson. I say to Dave and the team, well done, and I look forward to visiting you soon—I think that it is in my diary for 13 December.

While I am on my feet, I suggest to the minister that he visits some of the projects that I have mentioned, because they are just good.

12:54

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing it. Ms Grahame has highlighted really well the challenges that our young people face in Scotland today. I, too, pay tribute to Tweeddale Youth Action on its recent 25th anniversary and for its work and the support that it provides to young people across the Tweeddale area.

Tweeddale Youth Action gives young people a safe space and an alternative to hanging out at bus stops and on street corners. Through providing free opportunities for all, it helps young people to develop skills, grow in confidence, make smart choices, take responsibility and, ultimately, feel that sense of belonging in the community that we all need to feel.

I was particularly interested to read that the charity has converted an empty Peebles High Street shop into a new food punks pizza facility, as Christine Grahame described. As members might know, I have raised the fact that action needs to be taken on vacant, abandoned and derelict buildings, so it is good that that empty shop has been converted.

As well as Tweeddale Youth Action, a number of other organisations carry out similar work in other parts of the country, including in Dumfries and Galloway in my South Scotland region. Dumfries and Galloway Council's youth work service is an integral part of the council's education, skills and community wellbeing directorate, and it operates under five overarching principles and priorities: community-based youth work; youth work in schools; youth democracy and participation; wider achievement and accreditation; and support to and collaboration with the third sector.

Dumfries and Galloway Council's youth work service works with young people aged 12 to 25 to provide a range of universal and targeted youth work opportunities for young people across Dumfries and Galloway to get involved. The team, whom I have met on a number of occasions, delivers a range of projects, programmes and services across our region to broaden young people's horizons and to aid their personal and social development, to name but a few of its aims.

Among the awards and achievements that the team offers are the John Muir award; the saltire award; the Hi5, dynamic youth and youth achievement awards, which are Youth Scotland awards; the heritage hero award; the participative

democracy certificate; and the Duke of Edinburgh's award. I know how valuable those awards can be for the young people who take part in the relevant schemes.

Dumfries and Galloway Council's youth work service ran the 10,000 voices in action project, which aimed to give young people a direct voice. That led to the publication of the "10,000 Voices" report. The 10,000 voices in action project focused on enabling young people to use their voices to have autonomy over their own funding and to decide who should receive that funding. The youth action groups, who are made up of young people from every area of Dumfries and Galloway, will come together virtually to explore the issues in their community and how they want those issues to be solved.

Of the 14 questions that were asked, the highest-scoring responses across the region were in relation to young people feeling safe in their community, their being able to regularly experience good-quality natural spaces and their feeling that they could easily walk and cycle around their local area. Interestingly, the report also showed that many young people wished to stay in the region but were concerned that no employment opportunities would be available. I know that work is being done to resolve that.

I invite the minister to consider coming to Dumfries and Galloway to meet the young people and the team in the youth work service. I again welcome Christine Grahame's debate and all the work that is under way to support our young people in Scotland. I look forward to attending this evening's youth awards ceremony in Dumfries at Easterbrook hall.

12:58

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Christine Grahame on bringing the debate to Parliament. Ms Grahame and I seem to be appearing on stage and on screen as a regular duo at the moment. I am not sure whether we are Romeo and Juliet or Hinge and Bracket—I will leave that to others to determine.

Like Christine Grahame, I have recently visited Tweeddale Youth Action to learn more about its important work. A few years ago, I went with one of my council colleagues to see the youth drop-in centre in action. Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of popping into the new food punks pizza parlour in Peebles High Street to meet Stuart Clink and Dave Hodson, whose commitment is invaluable. In a sense, they have become like rock stars in their own community. As Stuart said—Christine Grahame alluded to this—some of the young people have not had meaningful and

constructive contact with adults, and it was great to see that work to provide such contact in action.

The premises have a really cool and smart interior for a younger generation, but I encourage anyone who is visiting Peebles or who lives in the Peebles or Tweeddale area to visit food punks, which has a fantastic meal deal offer and uses high-quality ingredients. However, it is not just about appearances: the whole shop is a safe, inspiring and creative environment where young people can express themselves, ask questions, be themselves and learn in a welcoming and friendly environment.

Through food punks, young people from across Peebles receive an invaluable kind of mentoring that they may not have found in a traditional learning environment. Stuart and Dave are clear that that is an alternative route for children who may have been failed by other routes or traditional methodologies. They provide real-world hands-on experiences that will be transformative for many of the young people and allow them to develop skills that can be taken around the United Kingdom and might take some of them around the world.

We should learn from such projects, because they shine a light on how, for a relatively small number of people, life could be very difficult if they relied only on traditional educational pathways. That sort of practical learning is exactly what some young people need to thrive. It provides opportunities to gain confidence by engaging with the public, to acquire important practical skills and—as Stuart and Dave recognise—to become part of a team, which may be something that they have not experienced before.

Hospitality is a hugely rewarding industry but is not celebrated enough. There are different pathways into hospitality. It is important to recognise that the food punks model could be a unique and fulfilling route for young people who might otherwise go in a different direction and that it can allow them to start out on a rewarding and potentially long-term career. The Scottish Government and other Governments should look to fund such models, because it is clear that, when a young person is failed and goes on to pursue a less wholesome route, that comes at huge cost for society, the individual and their friends and family. Spending £10 today can lead to many hundreds of pounds being saved at another point.

I am a huge advocate of that type of education, and I encourage the minister to visit not only food punks but some of the other projects around the country—*[Interruption.]* The minister says that he has been already, which is good to hear. In East Lothian, we have the Ridge project in Dunbar, which teaches young people vitally important stonemasonry skills, and the Bridge centre in Haddington, where young people learn through

programmes such as the motorcycle project. Those are all alternatives to traditional learning and skills environments but are no less important or impactful for being so.

I have asked the Parliament catering team whether food punks could use the members' restaurant to showcase their skills one evening. I have noticed that the catering schools from some of Scotland's colleges have recently been afforded that honour and privilege, but it would also be an honour and privilege for members to see food punks in action and to enjoy their food.

I thank Christine Grahame for bringing this important debate to the chamber and for giving us the opportunity to shine a spotlight on the great work done by TYA. I wish everyone involved well as TYA reaches its 25th birthday milestone, and I wish them many more years of success in delivering for the community in Tweeddale.

13:03

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, begin by thanking and congratulating Christine Grahame on securing this important debate and by wishing TYA a happy 25th birthday.

It is important that, in this chamber and more broadly in the country, we recognise the importance of youth work. Craig Hoy clearly expressed how the formality and structure of formal education is not right for some young people. The advantage of youth work is that it allows young people the opportunity to develop key life skills, build confidence and engage meaningfully with their communities and that they do so voluntarily. The TYA shows why all that is significant.

When youth work addresses young people's social, emotional and educational needs, it empowers them to overcome the barriers that they face. It unlocks their potential and enables them to thrive in their personal and professional lives as they grow up. However, despite the importance of youth work services, their availability across Scotland is inconsistent, and many young people, particularly in rural and economically deprived areas, face significant barriers to access.

That point allows me to mention my proposed youth work (Scotland) bill, the consultation for which was launched on Monday. It also allows me to put on the record my formal apologies to the next speaker, Ben Macpherson, as the launch took place at the Citadel Youth Centre in his constituency, where I was thrashed at pool by a brilliant player, but more of that at another time. The purpose of my bill is to establish a youth work strategy, a youth work fund, professional development, collaboration and integration, and national standards and evaluation.

As we have heard, youth work is not just an ethical imperative. There is also a financial reason to do it. The short-term impact is simple: it reduces the need for costly crisis services and interventions and it improves young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience. The medium-term impact is enhanced educational attainment and social inclusion, which alleviates the pressures on public services that we are only too well aware of. Most important, young people who can engage with successful youth work and with skilled youth workers on a long-term basis are equipped with the confidence and skills to contribute back to Scotland's economy and society, which reduces unemployment, inequality and reliance on welfare support.

However, my proposed bill is more than just a legislative proposal. It is a bold vision for a fairer and more inclusive Scotland. By ensuring that youth work is accessible, equitable and sustainable, the bill seeks to empower young people to reach their full potential and it will strengthen the fabric of our communities across the nation. The bill's provisions could be transformative because they are built on youth work, which is itself transformative. The opportunity to build stronger, more resilient communities must be one that we can all get behind, and it is through our young people that we can see that happen. We have heard some excellent examples of that in the debate.

In Tweeddale Youth Action, we see so many brilliant ideas that are capable of being rolled out across Scotland to benefit each community and each young person. A skilled youth worker engages with a young person at their level. That is very important and we should recognise it. I congratulate Christine Grahame once again because, in this debate, that is exactly what we are doing.

13:07

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, begin by paying tribute to Christine Grahame for bringing this important issue to the chamber, and I send my congratulations to Tweeddale Youth Action. I am grateful that the motion talks about the range of services that youth work provides—the diverse initiatives, the employment opportunities and the training that is available—and the fact that the organisations that provide all of that are often led by volunteers, although they also have dedicated staff and trustees who play such an important role. I am also grateful that the motion recognises the contribution that youth work makes across Scotland in improving outcomes for young people, and that is what I want to speak to.

First, we have the organisations that are involved all across the country, such as the scouts, the girl guides, the Boys Brigade and the YMCA. Those are all having an impact in my constituency at a local level through the different groups across Edinburgh Northern and Leith. However, as the motion emphasises, and as others have highlighted, there are also a number of specific organisations that are based in or operate in our constituencies—or, often, both—and I want to raise awareness about and commend some of the groups in my constituency.

The Citadel Youth Centre, which is run by Willie and Ryan and the rest of the team, has been making a huge difference to the communities of Leith for many years by providing a range of services, collaborations and support. I note the difference that Bryan made at Pilmeny Youth Centre, and I also mention Robbie at Street Soccer Scotland and its collaborations with organisations such as Leith Athletic Football Club and Hibernian Community Foundation, which also make a big difference in themselves.

Venture Scotland, which is based in Edinburgh Northern and Leith but provides services to a range of young people across the east of Scotland, takes people to places in rural Scotland where they would otherwise not necessarily go—including the Borders—to see the beauty of those areas and experience things that they would not otherwise be able to engage in.

Many will be aware of the Spartans Community Foundation in north Edinburgh, which has an innovative and pioneering football club that uses more than just the power of football to make a huge difference in Edinburgh's most deprived communities. For decades, Kenny and his team have been making a substantial impact.

The Granton Youth centre, Civil Service Strollers FC and a range of other organisations in north Edinburgh are engaged across the board in opportunities for young people.

Last but not least, I want to raise awareness of a small organisation in north Edinburgh. It was previously called FACENorth, and is now called Midnight and Beyond. The difference that it makes is symbolic of the intervention that youth work can provide: positive benefits for the youngsters who are involved, with a wider impact on society, community and the public purse.

People are well aware of the youth crime issues that we face in Edinburgh. They are serious and should be further up the agenda. I have already spoken about that in the chamber, and will say more in the period ahead. People are also aware of the issues that that has created in the east of Edinburgh, particularly around bonfire night—those have been well documented. A number of

years ago, we in north Edinburgh faced very similar issues to those that have been happening in the east. However, Midnight and Beyond has been working for two years with the groups of young people who were previously involved in fireworks night issues in north Edinburgh—and, for two years, because of that engagement, investment and support, we have not seen the same issues in north Edinburgh that we see in east Edinburgh on bonfire night. That is because of the collaboration between youth work organisations—in particular, Midnight and Beyond, but others as well—and the council and Police Scotland.

I end on that point, because it gets to the heart of what we celebrate and emphasise today. With minimal investment in youth work services, we can make a transformative difference for the people who benefit from them, and we can reduce negative consequences in the community and the cost to the public purse by making that worthy investment.

I know that we will hear from the minister in a minute about how the Scottish Government has invested significantly in youth work. However, if there is more that we can do, particularly in areas where there is challenge, we should think about the difference that we can make.

13:13

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank Christine Grahame for lodging the motion to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Tweeddale Youth Action.

I also take this opportunity to recognise and highlight the youth work sector as a whole. We know that front-line youth work positively impacts a young person's self-esteem and confidence and helps to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. Youth work does that by enabling young people to access non-formal education activities that enable them to learn about themselves, others and society. For that, I offer huge thanks to Tweeddale Youth Action, and I am delighted to congratulate it on celebrating 25 years of youth work and on the positive difference that it has made to many young people over that time.

That is a truly significant milestone to reach. Being able to sustain and evolve an offering to young people, with all the challenges that that can present in attracting and retaining volunteers, is quite something, and we should take the opportunity that Christine Grahame has handed us to acknowledge that.

I note the invitations that were issued by members to visit specific projects that they noted. I will give those invitations consideration, albeit that,

if I were to take up them all, I suspect that I would need to clone myself—and, as I am sure colleagues will agree, one of me is more than enough.

The Scottish Government values youth work as an essential and invaluable part of our education system. It helps young people to learn about themselves, others and society through enjoyable and challenging activities. However, more than that, it plays an important role in creating equity and supporting young people to reach their full potential. Craig Hoy alluded to that.

Craig Hoy: As the Scottish Government prepares to announce its budget next week, will the minister do everything that he can to encourage other ministers to maintain local authority funding? Many councils fund such organisations, and youth work and these projects are being put at risk by the resource issues that councils increasingly face.

Graeme Dey: I will not get into the budget, which will be announced next week, and nor will I stray into the territory of other portfolios. However, with regard to the projects that my budget funds, I am particularly keen to ensure that the money that we put into this work—we do quite a lot in that space—is directed to front-line delivery, because I have seen the positive benefits for myself.

It is important that we reflect on Tweeddale Youth Action's values. For example, it is important to TYA that, with regard to its projects,

“all young people can take part and belong, regardless of their financial situation”,

because that will help them to achieve their full potential, regardless of the background they come from.

As I have noted, TYA's success over the past 25 years is no small feat. It has achieved great things, and I am sure that it will continue to do that. Christine Grahame noted a number of its initiatives. What they have in common is that they all improve outcomes for young people. None of that is possible without the dedicated staff, volunteers and trustees, who give up their time to ensure that young people are supported through the many youth groups and activities that TYA provides. They do fantastic and invaluable work, and I extend my sincere thanks to each and every one of them for the support that they provide to young people and the role that they play. Their contribution cannot be overstated.

It is right that we celebrate their and TYA's achievements in improving the lives of many local young people over a sustained period. Not least, I mention their contribution to ensuring that young people have opportunities to thrive and, ultimately,

reach their potential to succeed. TYA's mission is to

“support young people ... on their journey from childhood to adulthood.”

It states:

“Through providing free opportunities for all, we help young people to develop skills, grow in confidence, make smart choices, take responsibility and, ultimately, feel that sense of belonging within their community that we all need.”

Those are TYA's words, not mine, but I wholeheartedly share and support those aims. The testimonials that Christine Grahame highlighted indicate that TYA is succeeding in its ambitions.

Looking to the future can often be daunting for young people. Each person's journey in the world of work is unique—there is no wrong path. Apprenticeships, college, university, volunteering and employment are all valid options, and I am determined that we continue to offer a range of opportunities for young people. As such, we want young people to make confident and informed decisions about their future, and I am sure that the initiatives offered by TYA have supported young people in that endeavour. The food punks and bike punks initiatives are excellent examples of that happening in practice.

Having made a number of visits to projects that are funded by the Scottish Government and others, I believe that third sector organisations play a critical role by using their expertise to address the issues that young people face and to support individuals who have been failed by the traditional education offering to find a way forward.

Since April 2016, the children, young people and families early intervention and adult learning and empowering communities fund has provided more than £14 million of annual funding to more than 100 third sector organisations across Scotland, as well as non-financial support. We are determined that Scotland's young people who are furthest from inclusion will realise their full potential in learning, life and work.

Christine Grahame: What has come out of the debate is how essential youth work is in helping children who might take the wrong route in life and, if we are being honest about it, the fact that it is not just individual young people who benefit but society. May I ask that youth work is made a priority across the education, health and justice portfolios? I say that because the issue is relevant to all those portfolios and, as well as creating positive lives for young people, so much could be saved in those portfolios. I want youth work to be higher on the Cabinet's agenda.

Graeme Dey: I do not sit in the Cabinet, and I cannot speak for it, but I say to Christine Grahame that, a few months ago, the First Minister and I

visited an exciting project in Glasgow, and we looked at the broader range of activities that were taking place in that area. I know that the First Minister was very—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please direct your comments to the microphone.

Graeme Dey: I apologise.

The First Minister, as I was, was very impressed with the impact that that project is having, so the issue is certainly on the First Minister's radar.

As I said, we are determined that Scotland's young people who are furthest from inclusion will realise their enormous potential. As we move forward, we intend to work with various stakeholders, including young people, in our endeavours. The independent review of community learning and development can underpin our aspirations in that regard. Our aim is to improve outcomes for young people by ensuring a stronger, better-connected system that promotes equality and equity. Equally important is raising the voices of young people, and I expect that the review will help us to provide a new framework that champions their voices and lived experience.

I thank Christine Grahame for allowing us to explore the great work that Tweeddale Youth Action is doing to improve outcomes for and the lives of the young people with whom it interacts, for her eloquent highlighting of that, and for the opportunity to explore the broader impacts of wider youth work. I wish TYA and the young people with whom it has engaged and continues to engage the very best for the future.

13:21

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

MSP Staff Cost Provision

1. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will consult MSP staff trade unions before deciding on uprating the staff cost provision in the 2025-26 financial year. (S6O-04046)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I thank Paul O'Kane for that question, which is similar to ones that we have received in previous years. The SPCB will not consult the trade unions, because it is not the employer of members' staff. The SPCB is responsible for funding the members' expenses scheme and for determining which indices are used to uprate the overall provisions, including staff cost provision. That arrangement is set out in the scheme as agreed by the Parliament.

Our responsibility is to set the framework within which salary increases can be agreed, but it is for individual members, as the employers, to determine any salary increase within the overall budget that is available, either on their own or in concert with colleagues.

Paul O'Kane: I remind colleagues of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a member of the GMB union.

The parliamentary staff unions are a large and active body and have worked year after year to deliver fair pay consideration for their members. Although I recognise what Jackson Carlaw said, which is that they are not negotiating bodies due to the parliamentary staff structure, does the SPCB agree that those who determine pay and conditions for staff should be in some form of formal communication with staff whose decisions they affect? Will he say what inflation index the SPCB intends to use to calculate the pay uplift this year?

Jackson Carlaw: On the second point, that will become apparent in near course. The SPCB is required under the expenses scheme to agree an index to uprate the staff cost provision. We agreed, in March 2020, to index according to a mix of average weekly earnings and the annual survey of hours and earnings—ASH, as it is commonly known. That move to a basket of indices was considered to prove a steadier basis for the calculation. However, for the budget in 2023-24 and 2024-25, the SPCB chose average weekly earnings for the staff cost provision, because the ASH index became quite erratic and, in

consequence, the staff cost provision would have risen by significantly less than it did as a result of us adopting AWE.

We have to pick an index. The analogy that I have used is that it is not for the SPCB members to perform as though we are bumblebees in a bottle, bouncing about erratically. There has to be an integrity behind the process. Therefore, suggestions that are made to us that we should just look, on an annual basis, to see which of those indices is going to deliver the largest uplift do not have a substantive integrity pinned to them.

Although I am not, at this stage, going to confirm which index we have used, it is important that there is some consistency and continuity in the process. I am confident that the index that the SPCB has adopted is the one that has proved consistent and favourable to all members.

I would just say, finally—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Very briefly, please.

Jackson Carlaw: —that it is the case that, this year, a considerable number of members will be well short of using their actual staff cost provision, and that, therefore, an uprated index would not make the difference to the provision that they have.

Chamber Visitor Experience Working Group

2. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on the output of the working group that was established to review the visitor experience in the chamber. (S6O-04043)

Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Since September, the head of security has visited the chamber regularly to observe the period between the end of First Minister's questions and the commencement of members' business, to understand how the movement of visitors is handled by security staff. Initial findings have shown that the changeover has been swift—within four minutes—and that those visiting were able to access the chamber for the start of members' business. The changeover is, however, being kept under review.

Tess White: I am not talking about First Minister's questions. Despite my raising concerns about the seating arrangements for visitors in the chamber, guests in the Scottish Parliament are still being positioned at the back of the gallery, even when there are empty spaces at the front. That does not afford them the best viewing experience, and many have travelled significant distances to be able to watch proceedings.

We should not be letting constituents down, particularly when they have travelled such a long way to see us, their MSPs, speaking on their behalf. Please could I have reassurances from the SPCB that expedient action will be taken to improve the visitor experience in the chamber?

Christine Grahame: I very much sympathise with the member's point. The matter was raised at the corporate body this morning, and we are looking into it.

Scottish Parliament App

3. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what progress has been made on the development of a Scottish Parliament app. (S6O-04039)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I know that the member will be disappointed when I tell him that there are no plans to develop a Scottish Parliament app. We do not have the capacity to develop an app, and the cost of commissioning an app externally is not proportionate to any perceived benefits.

The member may be interested to know that the Scottish Parliament TV supplier has developed an app that gives access to live and archived Parliament broadcasts, but it is limited to that purpose.

Stephen Kerr: I am disappointed to hear that answer, but I am not entirely surprised. I am enthusiastic about wanting to see the development of an app, because I believe passionately in making Parliament accessible to the people of Scotland—not just the Parliament's televisual representations through the SPTV app, but the business of Parliament. I recommend that the corporate body look at the United Kingdom Parliament's apps. Why should the UK Parliament have those excellent apps while we do not?

I make another plea to the corporate body: please make our Parliament accessible to the people of Scotland by giving them the means by which they are most likely to access it, namely an app.

Claire Baker: I know that the member has an interest in the Scottish Parliament having an app, as he had a positive experience of an app at Westminster—although the electorate decided that that would be short lived. He can still see the app if he wants to follow the business of the new Government, however.

As I said, our capacity in the Scottish Parliament is limited and does not compare to the resources available to the UK Parliament. Our website has been tested and optimised for use on all mobile devices, including mobile phones and tablets.

Legislation Team (Resourcing)

4. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will review whether the Parliament is providing sufficient resourcing for the legislation team to support MSPs to lodge amendments to bills. (S6O-04053)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): As with other parts of the parliamentary service, the staffing of the legislation team was reviewed as part of the strategic resources review at the beginning of this session. Staffing levels in this and other areas are monitored on an on-going basis, in response to demand. As necessary and, where possible, within budget, resources are flexed to meet changing demand.

Elena Whitham: There are more and more MSPs seeking to lodge more amendments, which is great to see and is a testament to our desire to create robust legislation. The dedicated, hard-working team that supports us is very small, however—and I put on record my thanks to them this week in relation to our emergency legislation.

The last 18 months of a parliamentary session are always busy, with bills making their way through. What more can be done to increase the team, ensuring timeous support for MSPs and, therefore, the efficient passage of legislation?

Maggie Chapman: I appreciate Ms Whitham's comments about the way in which the legislation team works. It has supported three pieces of emergency legislation since May this year, and that has put considerable demand on their time.

The corporate body will undertake to ensure that we are making the best use of resources, with that flex that I mentioned in my initial answer. Some bills have been subject to significant delays, and that causes some issues in how we plan and prioritise resources and in where they are. However, in the next few months we should have a clearer idea of exactly when different pieces of legislation will be going through stages 2 and 3, and we will hopefully be able to plan accordingly.

I hear Ms Whitham's comments, and we will take the matter back for further discussion.

Staff Recognition

5. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body how it ensures that parliamentary staff are properly recognised and compensated for all of the work that they do for the Parliament, including any specific project work that is over and above their normal responsibilities. (S6O-04051)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body is mindful of its duty to ensure that the workload of its staff is carefully managed, and that staff are recognised for the valuable contribution that they make, including to project work.

The SPCB's performance management approach ensures that staff objectives are set, reviewed and updated so that staff are well supported in their roles. The corporate body operates pay policy arrangements that ensure that staff are appropriately compensated for additional overtime work that they are required to carry out.

Lorna Slater: The Parliament has given its support to the gender-sensitive Parliament project, but it has not adequately resourced the work. Clerking staff and others are expected to do the work essentially as volunteers, over and above their core work. In addition, most of those volunteers are women. Does the SPCB consider that it is appropriate that women have to work as volunteers to improve equality in their workplace? Will Mr Carlaw and the corporate body work to ensure that such projects, which are aimed at improving inclusion in Holyrood, will be resourced appropriately and that staff will be compensated accordingly?

Jackson Carlaw: A number of SPCB staff have volunteered to support the implementation of the recommendations of the gender-sensitive audit, including a number of male colleagues, while other staff have been allocated roles. Decisions on the allocation of resources to support the project have been based on the skills and experience of the individuals involved, as well as the substantive roles that they hold. Gender has not, in itself, been a deciding factor. In all cases, in accordance with the SPCB's performance management approach, staff have taken on roles to support the work of the gender-sensitive audit board on the basis that they have sufficient capacity and expertise to do so. The SPCB keeps that under constant review, as would be expected, to ensure that the correct level of staffing support is available to the board and that staff workload is properly and effectively monitored.

Car Park

6. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on the access and exiting arrangements for the underground car park. (S6O-04049)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I am sure that the member will appreciate the importance of security for the building and of the changes that were made to the car park, which was identified as a weak spot. The two layers of security have resulted in longer waits

to enter and exit the car park, but that has to be balanced with our security requirements. The system is working as designed.

Liz Smith: I am by no means the only member who has considerable concerns about the length of the waiting time to which the member referred. In my case, I had to wait 16 minutes some months ago, when there was a queue of seven vehicles inside the car park. The problem can be mitigated when the system is operated manually and staff carefully allow several cars to exit at the same time. What is the SPCB doing to try to speed up the process and avoid the interminable delays that often make us late for other engagements?

Claire Baker: I hear what the member says, and I am concerned about the length of time that she identified. It is not an experience that I have had, but the corporate body is looking at the matter seriously. A range of vehicles access the building through the security system, and the waits need to be balanced against security measures. We use the members priority exit and we are adjusting the times that suppliers can access the building. For security reasons, suppliers need to access the loading area through the car park. The corporate body intends to observe the operation of the system, and we will consider any suggestions about how the process can be improved.

Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (Training)

7. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on the training of MSPs and staff on duties under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. (S6O-04055)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Members are designated as prescribed persons under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, following its amendment in December 2022. To support members in that role, the corporate body issued guidance on handling disclosures to all members and their staff. The guideline outlines the circumstances in which protected disclosures might be made to individual members, how they should manage those disclosures and the legal implications of that. We also arranged training that was offered by external experts in early 2023. Those sessions offered some practical advice on handling cases.

Richard Leonard: MSPs have been prescribed persons under the act since 2022, and with rights come responsibilities. I ask the corporate body to re-establish in-person training and refresher courses for all MSPs and their staff before the end of quarter 1 in 2025.

Jackson Carlaw: Richard Leonard makes a reasonable case. The corporate body has asked officials to review the training that is offered to

members to ensure that it covers all aspects of their roles and to consider whether further training might be provided to help to refresh their knowledge and understanding of their roles. Officials are also considering whether the training needs to be added to the members' staff training plan in line with normal practice. The members' staff forum will be consulted to ensure that it meets their needs.

External Engagements (Support)

8. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what support is provided to MSPs when representing the Parliament at external engagements. (S6O-04045)

Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Where members are officially representing the Parliament at external engagements, full support is provided by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body staff to assist with planning and delivering the engagement. That includes making logistical arrangements, providing briefings, accompanying members to engagements and providing communications support. The exact nature of the support will vary, depending on the nature of the engagement.

Martin Whitfield: Representation, in particular in other countries, with other Parliaments and other parliamentarians, is very important for the Parliament's reputation around the world. Can Christine Grahame give specific examples of how members are supported when they travel abroad?

Christine Grahame: I listed them in my first response. Before departure, the international relations office actively confers with delegates on how the visit will be publicised—for example, asking members to sign off any social media content and whether to tag them personally. It also offers robust comms and support for committees.

As I said in my first reply, what support there is really depends on the nature of the visit. If some extraordinary support needs to be provided by the SPCB, that would be considered.

Regarding communications, the IRO, ahead of external visits, will discuss any proactive or reactive comms that may be required; I am aware that sometimes bad publicity that is undeserved is conferred on some of those visits.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Apologies to those members whom we did not manage to reach during this question time; it is a busy afternoon of business, and we have to move on to the next item. There will be a brief pause to allow members on the front benches to change before we do so.

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

14:16

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio on this occasion is social justice. If members wish to ask a supplementary question, I encourage them to press their buttons during the relevant question.

Number of Births

1. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on population trends, what its response is to National Records of Scotland data showing that 2023 had the lowest number of recorded births since records began in 1855. (S6O-04021)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Scotland is not alone in experiencing falling birth rates, which is a trend across many high-income countries. That has significant implications for the sustainability of our economies, communities and public services, which is why our population strategy sets out our ambition to ensure that Scotland is the ideal place in which to raise a family.

In 2022, the ministerial population task force undertook research to explore family planning and ideal family size. The task force is now considering the next steps for that work, alongside the recent census data, to support people to have the number of children that they wish to have.

Kenneth Gibson: Scotland's total fertility rate is now one of the world's lowest, reaching a historic low of 1.28 last year, in comparison with 1.9 in Sweden, for example. It is now only 61 per cent of replacement level, which should worry us all. We have no powers over migration in Scotland, so without more children, public services and the economy will struggle as fewer working-age people support ever-growing numbers of dependants.

Does the Government accept what our European neighbours realised years ago, which is the need to address falling birth rates? If so, what further measures can the Government take to address this potentially existential crisis?

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government is clear that it is not for us to seek to dictate or influence whether an individual should have a child or how many children they should choose to have. However, a key aim of the family-friendly strand of our population strategy is to ensure that

we are creating the right conditions for people to have the number of children that they wish to have. The task force brings together relevant ministers from across the Scottish Government to ensure that we take a joined-up cross-portfolio approach to delivering on the ambitions that the strategy sets out.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Kenny Gibson is quite right to raise those demographic concerns, which come at the same time as we are battling against rising rates of economic inactivity. What does the minister see as the top priority when it comes to policies to address economic inactivity?

Kaukab Stewart: As we have talked about quite a lot, the issue of housing is very much connected with economic activity. Through our population strategy, we recognise that uncertainty about housing can impact on an individual's decision to have a family, remain in a community and contribute to the economy.

Scotland has the right long-term plan for housing, and we are working at pace, in collaboration with partners, to critically review and prioritise the actions in those plans. Partnership working at all levels—UK Government, Scottish Government and local government, as well as with key sectoral partners—is needed to deliver that.

Social Security Uptake (Ethnic Minority Groups)

2. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the reported disproportionately lower levels of social security uptake among ethnic minority groups. (S6O-04022)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to ensuring that everyone takes up the benefits that they are entitled to and we are supporting ethnic minority communities to access those payments. That includes funding for accessible advice providers who support ethnic minority clients, engagement with faith-based groups and co-location of local delivery services in community spaces that people already attend.

Information about benefits is translated into 12 community languages and people can also request translation support for more than 100 additional languages. Social Security Scotland has undertaken user research with people who speak English as a second language, insights from which will influence work to support take-up.

Paul O'Kane: Analysis of client and applicant data by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights shows that only 6.3 per cent of applicants are black and minority ethnic, which is well below the Scottish population average. That analysis

also found particular underrepresentation in disability payments and that people were more likely to have applications rejected. The Scottish Government's stats show that relative poverty among BME groups is more than 50 per cent, compared with only 20 per cent in the overall population.

We know that social security is an important part of the anti-poverty strategy, but reductions in the development of marketing campaigns could impact on groups that are less heard and less able to access information. Will the cabinet secretary reflect on that and say what she will do with regard to those budgets?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Paul O'Kane for raising that important issue. We are determined to improve the take-up of all benefits from all groups in society, but I recognise that there are some concerning statistics, particularly around the ethnic minority communities and the disabled, as Paul O'Kane recognises.

I mentioned some of the user research work that is being undertaken to determine exactly the reasons behind that. It is the responsibility of the Government, not of individuals, to make the process as easy as possible, and we are determined to do everything that we can. Marketing is one example. There might be other barriers, but we are determined to tackle them and, therefore, to increase take-up.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Between April and June this year, there were 25,230 applications for adult disability payment, of which only 6 per cent had any involvement with VoiceAbility, an organisation that is funded heavily by the Scottish Government.

Does Ms Somerville believe that that is value for money? If not, will she carry out a review to see whether the money could be better targeted towards citizens advice bureaux and other such organisations?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that Mr Balfour agrees that the principle behind the services that VoiceAbility provides is important. We are determined to ensure that that type of support is available to people, so I am concerned about anything that suggests that the people who might benefit from that service are not coming forward. Again, we need to look at the barriers to that, and I would be happy to keep Mr Balfour updated on that work in due course, as it progresses.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is from Jamie Greene, who joins us remotely.

Charity Funding

3. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I apologise for not being in the chamber.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported comments from the director of the human rights charity, Making Rights Real, that "the long arm of the government often stretches to silence organisations that receive funding from the state". (S6O-04023)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government welcomes discussion and challenge on all matters of public policy, and from all quarters. It is fundamental to the health of our democracy.

I therefore respectfully disagree with the characterisation that Jamie Green has relayed. Internal governance procedures are in place to ensure that public funding is awarded without prejudice or a single point of influence. They include an internal audit system, a governance and accountability team, and accountable officer processes that ensure that funding is awarded on the basis of value for money and the outcomes and objectives that best serve the people of Scotland.

Jamie Greene: The minister is welcome to disagree with me, but I note that I was directly quoting the concerns of a charity and third sector organisation. Those were not my own comments or views, so she is, in fact, disagreeing with that organisation.

I hear what the Government is saying about how it believes that funding is free from prejudice, but the same article that I quoted from in my initial question alludes to a number of third sector organisations that are genuinely worried that, if they criticise the Scottish Government, they will put their funding at risk. The fact that they will not even share those concerns publicly, I think, vindicates that very possibility.

I therefore ask the minister to be clear and give a cast-iron guarantee to any charities or third sector organisations that are in receipt of public money that they are completely free to criticise the Scottish Government and that they will face absolutely no consequences whatsoever if they do.

Kaukab Stewart: It is certainly not the case that the Scottish Government is silencing any criticism.

Since I came into post, we have had to make some very difficult decisions. I, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, have engaged fully with a wide variety of stakeholders. We have heard the significant disappointment in certain areas from stakeholders, including those who are in receipt of public funding. That criticism can also readily be found in the public domain.

Our ask of stakeholders is that they stay the course with us as we continue to work with them to test and refine, for instance, the proposals around the human rights bill ahead of its introduction next session.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Would the minister agree that the Scottish Government's ambition to embed human rights into Scotland's public services is possible only through continued close working with third sector and voluntary organisations, and that collaborative work has massively benefited Scottish society in recent years, despite the unprecedented challenges of austerity and the cost of living crisis?

Kaukab Stewart: I whole-heartedly agree. It is evident that the dedication and expertise of our diverse and dynamic third sector have been crucial in shaping Scotland's policy landscape. That is especially the case in relation to our work around seeking to better embed the delivery of human rights in our public services.

I note, again, that I am grateful for the support and challenge of the organisations that have been involved in that work to date. I look forward to our continued close collaboration as we progress the human rights agenda across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Energy Costs (Support)

5. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is available this winter to people on low incomes, particularly as temperatures drop and in light of the reported predicted increase in energy prices. (S6O-04025)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): This winter, we are forecasted to invest more than £65 million in our winter heating benefits. Additionally, our island cost crisis emergency fund and energy efficiency programmes, warmer homes Scotland and area-based schemes provide vital support to households in or at risk of fuel poverty.

This year alone, we are spending £134 million to mitigate United Kingdom Government policies through schemes such as the discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund, which provide vital support to households struggling with housing and energy costs.

I will soon make a statement setting out in detail this Government's support for older people.

Karen Adam: Over the past few weeks, I have been hosting a number of informative drop-ins across Banffshire and Buchan Coast for constituents who are concerned about high fuel

bills. Amid all the uncertainty caused by the UK Government's budgetary decisions this winter, low-income households in Scotland can at least be assured that they can access regular annual support in the form of the Scottish winter heating payment. Is the cabinet secretary aware of how many households are likely to benefit from that payment compared with the unreliable UK cold weather payment that it replaced in 2022?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Our winter heating payment will provide a guaranteed payment of £58.75 this winter. That payment was made to almost 418,000 households last winter alone, totalling £23 million of investment.

The Department for Work and Pensions cold weather payments that were provided to Scottish residents prior to the introduction of the winter heating payment exceeded £20 million in only two of the previous 11 years, and they have not surpassed the projected £24.4 million that was invested in the delivery of the winter heating payment in 2024-25.

The winter heating payment breaks the link with weather dependency by providing financial support no matter the weather. Low-income households will automatically be paid, so they do not have to, ironically, hope for sustained cold weather in order to receive support.

Rural and Islands Housing Fund

6. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how many houses have been built in rural communities, as a direct result of funding from the rural and islands housing fund, since the fund was established. (S6O-04026)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Since the rural and islands housing fund was first launched in 2016-17, it has supported the delivery of 253 affordable homes. The fund plays an important role in offering support to community organisations, private landowners and others to deliver affordable homes. It complements the significant delivery of homes in rural and island areas by councils and registered social landlords through our mainstream affordable housing supply programme.

Tim Eagle: Research by Scottish Land & Estates revealed that more than £100 million of funding that had been earmarked for rural and island communities was diverted to housing projects in Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Given that several rural local authorities—including that of the Minister for Housing's constituency—have declared housing emergencies, how does that decision square with the Scottish National Party Government's talk about reversing rural depopulation?

Paul McLennan: That is not correct. Funding through Scotland's main affordable housing supply programme is not ring fenced for urban or rural areas; therefore, there is no money to be returned, for analysis purposes. Projects may be recorded as rural or urban based on population and accessibility data and according to the definition that is set out in published guidance. The share of funding that each local authority area receives through the affordable housing supply programme is informed by the strategic housing investment plan and the housing and planning delivery framework that is agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and that supports the delivery of local authority strategic affordable housing priorities.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Can the minister lay out what support the Scottish Government is providing to rural and island areas, in addition to the direct grants that are provided by the rural and islands housing fund, to support community-led and owned housing initiatives, such as the impressive work of the Gatehouse development initiative in South Scotland?

Paul McLennan: In addition to the £30 million in the rural and islands housing fund, which is available for communities, we are providing a three-year package of financial support of almost £1 million to Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing to provide support and expertise to communities to enable the delivery of affordable homes across rural and island communities.

We are also continuing to support the delivery of affordable homes in rural and island communities through the mainstream affordable housing supply programme, including up to £25 million to support affordable homes for key workers, where there is identified need.

Disability Equality Plan

7. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will commit to redrafting its disability equality plan, in light of the reported criticisms from the organisations that were asked to be involved in its co-production. (S6O-04027)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I recently met Jeremy Balfour, other members and disabled people's organisations to discuss the plan. It will take a collective effort and investment over several years to deliver equality for disabled people. This first publication is one step on that journey and does not represent the full extent of our ambition.

Due to the challenging fiscal situation, difficult decisions had to be made to ensure that this first stage of our plan is deliverable. The plan lays

important foundations around improved accountability and collective leadership, and future phases can build on that to deliver impactful change.

Sandesh Gulhane: Clearly, the minister was not at the meeting that others remember, because Disability Equality Scotland, Glasgow Disability Alliance and Inclusion Scotland have described their members as "raging" with the Scottish Government. They say that the co-production process has been a "sham" and that they are left with a "weak" and "diluted" disability plan. To quote Tressa Burke, GDA's chief executive, the plan offers

"no commitment to meaningful action and no progress towards disabled people's equality".

After spending 20 months of time and resources trying to collaborate with the Scottish Government, co-production has collapsed and DPOs have withdrawn support. That is a very familiar tale when it comes to the Scottish National Party Government. It says that it has engaged, but the problem is that it does not listen. Yet again it has failed to deliver on its promises. Will the minister make urgent changes to the plan, given that not one of the stakeholders' five key asks has been met by the current version?

Kaukab Stewart: I reassure the Parliament and the member that I have extensively engaged with disabled people's organisations and that I am in regular contact with them. We have taken the time that was needed to genuinely engage with disabled people's organisations, and to fully consider their feedback and make changes wherever possible. We have heard their concerns loud and clear. That is what meaningful co-operation requires, which reflects my commitment to ensuring that the plan can and will be delivered. Collective leadership, accountability and disability competence underpin every action in the plan. We are undertaking dedicated cross-governmental work in order to achieve that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a couple of supplementary questions.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I was dismayed to read Keir Starmer's comments on the

"bulging benefits bill blighting our society."

That type of rhetoric perpetuates the stigmatisation of social security support and deters people who need support—including disabled people, many of whom we know have a high instance of poverty in the family—from seeking it.

Many of my colleagues will have just donned a Christmas jumper for Save the Children, which is looking to reduce the stigma around poverty. Does the Government agree that its equality and human

rights fund and the support that it will provide to disabled people's organisations this year will be very welcome?

Kaukab Stewart: I agree with Clare Adamson's comments. Our £5 million equality and human rights fund is helping to tackle inequality and discrimination. The forecast spend for 2024-25 on the disability portfolio that is included in the fund is £2.1 million, which is inclusive of core grant funding to disabled people's organisations—Glasgow Disability Alliance, Disability Equality Scotland and Inclusion Scotland. The fund also includes a range of projects that deliver vital services to disabled people across Scotland.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The disability groups have heard all that previously and are not impressed. In fact, they were raging at the meeting that I was at—indeed, they were so angry with the minister's and the Government's actions that they swore. The Scottish National Party MSPs who groaned away when the question was raised should have been at that meeting, because they would have understood how angry those groups are. What new thing will the minister bring today to repair the relationship with that sector? Unless she brings something new, those groups will not believe her ever again.

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Willie Rennie for raising that point. I was at that meeting and I have already stated that I have heard the groups' concerns and frustrations loud and clear. I will continue to engage, because it is my duty and my job to do so.

I recognise that the aspirations of disabled people and their organisations lie beyond what could be delivered in the first phase of the plan. Difficult decisions had to be made to ensure that the actions could be achieved in the challenging economic situation that Scotland faces. A budget is coming and I ask members across the chamber to vote for it, as I am hopeful that it will provide some kind of reassurance to disabled people's organisations.

Islamophobia

8. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, as part of its work on diversity, inclusion and equalities, what recent discussions the Minister for Equalities has had with ministerial colleagues regarding work to tackle Islamophobia. (S6O-04028)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of tackling Islamophobia while ensuring equality and inclusion for everyone. In September, I wrote to ministers across Government to remind them of their legal duties under the public sector equality duty. I am now

undertaking one-to-one meetings with them and continuing to work closely with those who hold shared portfolio interests, including the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, who has responsibility for hate crime. That will help us to explore what actions can be taken to improve equality and human rights and to reflect our collective agenda to tackle all forms of religious prejudice, including Islamophobia.

Foyso Choudhury: After the events of this summer, it is more important than ever that we work to tackle Islamophobia and hate. The Scottish Government accepted the recommendations of the report on Islamophobia by the cross-party group on challenging racial and religious prejudice. Will the minister advise what progress the Scottish Government is making on implementing the recommendations, which include adopting a definition of Islamophobia and a workplace discrimination toolkit?

Kaukab Stewart: Our on-going work on tackling hate crime and the causes of Islamophobia is incorporated in our key priorities, which include delivery of the hate crime strategy, as well as wider cross-governmental activities. Our approach is supported by equality stakeholders, and there are regular opportunities to review priorities for tackling all forms of hatred and prejudice, including Islamophobia. The United Kingdom Government is considering the issue, too, and we will consider any decisions that it makes with implications for our own approach to adopting a definition in due course.

Older People's Energy Costs

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on supporting older people with increasing energy costs.

Further to an earlier point of order, I note that some aspects of the Scottish Government's statement have appeared in the media and, therefore, in the public domain before the Parliament's elected members have had an opportunity to put questions to the Government. It is the Government's responsibility to manage information to avoid such a situation occurring, which is disrespectful to the Parliament.

The cabinet secretary has written to me to apologise. In the interests of our constituents and public transparency, I will allow the statement to be made, but I have asked the cabinet secretary to shorten the statement to allow more time for questions.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am grateful for your clarification. Normally, spokesmen and spokeswomen get early sight of a ministerial statement, but, having spoken to my colleagues, I understand that that has only just happened, which means that it will be difficult to properly scrutinise the statement. Have you thought of asking the Government to move the statement to later today—perhaps before decision time—so that the Parliament can properly scrutinise the very important decision that is going to be made?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour. It is, of course, convention that the Scottish Government strives to ensure that members have as much advance sight of statements as possible. We will continue with this item of business, but your comments are on the record. I will now pass to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice.

14:42

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice

(Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Before I make my statement, let me apologise to you once again—and, indeed, to members—for the unfortunate early coverage of some of the content of my statement in the media this morning. Regrettably, the coverage gave high-level information regarding the announcement that I am about to make.

Presiding Officer, we take very seriously your guidance that details of any major announcement should not be publicly released before it is made to the Parliament. Accordingly, as you said, I have written to you to formally apologise, and I am grateful for the opportunity to make a shortened

version of the statement and to answer members' questions. I add an apology to Opposition spokespeople for the fact that I have not provided them with early sight of my statement, as I usually do.

I turn to my statement. As members will know, the United Kingdom Government announced its decision on 29 July to restrict entitlement to the winter fuel payment from this winter to people in receipt of pension credit and other means-tested benefits. That meant that an important provision of financial support that had up until now been available to all pensioners across the UK was abolished. The decision was taken with less than an hour's notice to and no discussion with the Scottish Government.

As a result of the decision, Scotland's share of the block grant adjustment funding, which we had planned to use to introduce pension age winter heating payment, our like-for-like replacement for the winter fuel payment, was cut by £147 million—a cut of more than 80 per cent to that budget. That had an immediate and profound impact on our ability to continue as planned and to offer our payment as the universal benefit that we had intended implement this year.

As members will be aware, we could not identify the additional funding that was required in-year to mitigate the UK Government's decision. In addition, the timing of the UK Government announcement meant that alternative approaches to either a universal payment or the means-tested approach that was introduced by the UK Government could not be implemented in the time that was available to us.

We have repeatedly urged the UK Government to reverse the decision; indeed, the Parliament has supported that call. However, our representations have been ignored and payments of the benefit will be delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions under an agency agreement with Scottish ministers this winter. That approach will at least ensure that vital support is available to those eligible pensioners who are most in need of help with their fuel bills this winter.

Unfortunately, that means that, once again, we are in a position in which the Scottish Government is having to mitigate the impact of the UK Government's damaging decisions on social security policy. There has been a change, but the change is that we are now mitigating the actions of a Labour Government rather than those of a Tory one.

The Scottish Government provides a wide range of heating cost support to our pensioners. For example, our winter heating payment guarantees a reliable annual payment, and—unlike the UK Government's cold weather payment—it does that

regardless of the weather, the temperature or proximity to a weather station.

We are also continuing our child winter heating payment, which, last year, provided support to more than 30,000 children, young people and their families who had higher energy needs due to disability or a health condition. That benefit is not available elsewhere in the UK.

Meanwhile, our warmer homes Scotland scheme and our area-based schemes support people who are experiencing fuel poverty to make their homes warmer and more fuel efficient. In the past decade, those two programmes have supported more than 150,000 households living in, or at risk of, fuel poverty.

All those programmes are valuable, but we all recognise that households across the country are acutely feeling the twin pressures of the cuts to social security budgets that have been made over many years by successive UK Governments—Conservative and now Labour—and of rising energy costs, despite Labour's promise that people's energy bills would fall if Labour was in government. Bills are set to rise again in January.

This year alone, the Scottish Government has already spent £134 million on mitigating the effects of UK Government welfare decisions. Although we cannot possibly mitigate the effects of every decision that is made by the UK Government, we are determined to do more where it is possible for us to do so.

I am therefore announcing today that the Government will invest a further £20 million in the Scottish welfare fund's budget, which will be distributed to councils this financial year. That increase will help councils to meet the increased demands on the fund that exist as a result of decisions by Westminster.

I am also confirming today that we will invest an additional £20 million in the warmer homes Scotland scheme, which focuses on long-term sustainable measures. That additional funding will help a wider group of households to install energy efficiency measures and more efficient heating systems, which will save them an average of around £300 per year in energy bills.

Finally, for this year, in response to the calls that have been made by a coalition of housing and anti-poverty organisations for a shift in spending from crisis intervention to prevention, I will direct an additional £1 million of grant funding to registered social landlords and third sector partners for tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention work.

Although those measures will go some way to allaying the fears of older people in Scotland ahead of winter, the Government recognises that

more must be done. That is precisely why I have consistently committed to keeping the eligibility for pension age winter heating payments under review.

After careful consideration, I am announcing today to Parliament that, ahead of next winter, I will bring forward regulations to introduce a universal pension age winter heating payment for every Scottish pensioner in the winter of 2025-26. That universal benefit, which will provide much-needed support that is not available anywhere else in the UK, will deliver support across Scotland's older people, as we had always intended to do before the UK Government decided to cut the payment. It will help to mitigate the increases in energy costs, provide vital cost of living support for all pensioner households and help to reduce pensioner poverty.

The full details of our proposed approach will be set out in the Scottish Government's budget. However, I can announce that pensioners in Scotland who are in receipt of a relevant qualifying benefit, such as pension credit, and who, this winter, will receive payments of £200 or £300, depending on their age, will continue to receive those payments automatically next winter. In addition, we will introduce universal payments of £100 to every other pensioner household. That will ensure that those pensioners who are in receipt of pension credit or other means-tested benefits will receive a higher amount of support that will protect their incomes. At the same time, it will ensure that support is provided to all pensioner households. Such support will not be available elsewhere in the UK.

We have not taken that decision lightly, given the significant pressures on the Scottish Government's budget, but we are determined to stay true to our values. On our watch, we will treat people in this country with fairness, dignity and respect. We will not abandon older people in this or any winter, and we will continue to protect our pensioners from the harsh reality of a UK Labour Government.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for those questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. Members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note what you said, Presiding Officer, in your opening remarks. The Scottish Government was rightly angered by the UK Government not giving any notice of changes to the winter fuel payment and, therefore, undermining the necessary scrutiny, but the same thing has happened this

afternoon: we have not had prior sight of the statement to allow us to scrutinise it properly.

There is more than a hint of irony in today's announcement, because the Scottish National Party moans constantly about its hands being tied, fiscally, by the bad deeds of Westminster when, as the Scottish Fiscal Commission rightly said a few months ago, some of the real pressure on budgets comes from the Scottish Government's decisions, so it is simply not true when ministers argue that they had absolutely no choice but to leave pensioners out in the cold.

I have two questions for the cabinet secretary. First, does she admit that the SNP is hoodwinking pensioners by pretending that it is bringing back the full winter fuel payment when that is simply not the case? Secondly, the cabinet secretary said in her statement that she will bring forward regulations, so will she confirm whether she will do that via primary legislation and, if so, when that will happen?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I apologised to Opposition spokespeople at the beginning of my remarks, and I now do so directly to Liz Smith. I hope that she has known me well enough for long enough to know that what has happened was absolutely not my intention.

We have returned to providing a universal payment for pensioners, and we are determined to hold to that important principle. If anyone is concerned about the principles behind social security, that should be because of the discussion that Russell Findlay has instigated since taking over leadership of the Scottish Conservatives. He has questioned the amount that we spend on social security in Scotland and, when I asked him directly whether that meant that he wants to cut money for low-income families, disabled people, carers or pensioners, he could not give me an answer. That is most concerning. We see the payment as an investment in our people and an important protection for our pensioners.

Liz Smith asked about the regulations, which we will make using secondary legislation, as we have done with all benefits since passing the Social Security (Scotland) Bill in 2018.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It would be customary to thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. We note the short period of time that she had, but we, of course, read her plans in some detail in today's press.

I welcome the support that is finally being offered this winter. The cabinet secretary knows that I have always said that more could be done this winter. I have consistently asked in the chamber about the £42 million that will come as a result of UK Government decisions about the household support fund. Will the cabinet secretary

finally provide some clarity on what will be done with the Barnett consequential that will come as a result of spending this winter?

In addition, we have always said that the pension-age winter heating payment, which is devolved to Scotland, provides an opportunity to widen the criteria beyond those receiving pension credit. I again point to the in-year announcement of £1.5 billion of Barnett consequential for the Scottish Government, with the figure rising to £3.4 billion in the budget next year. I ask the cabinet secretary whether it is as a result of that spending that she is able to announce that she will bring forward regulations on the pension-age winter heating payment, given that she previously said that that would be impossible because she did not have the money and that she

"cannot base a budget on a wing, a prayer and a promise".—[*Official Report*, 3 October 2024; c 44.]

Finally, will she speak to the Poverty and Inequality Commission about its opinion of her payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I gently point out to Paul O'Kane that we would not have to take mitigating action this winter if the Labour Government had not whipped money away from pensioners. That is why I have had to make my announcement today. As well as asking some questions, which he is obviously right to do, Mr O'Kane and his party should come here with a bit of humility and apologise to Scotland's pensioners for putting us in this position in the first place.

Presiding Officer, please forgive me if I am slightly misquoting Mr O'Kane, but he said, "We have always said". With the greatest respect, I note that Labour has said a lot of things at a UK level and a Scottish Government level since the chancellor made the announcement. Most particularly, there have been two votes on the matter—one in the UK Parliament and one in the Scottish Parliament—and every Labour member was whipped to vote against Scotland's pensioners. I am proud that the Scottish Government is, once again, stepping up to defend Scotland's pensioners, and we will continue to do that. It is a shame that Scottish Labour has not done the same.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Labour promised to lower energy bills but, instead, the energy price cap has risen twice, with total inaction from the UK Government. Labour cut the provision to 900,000 Scottish pensioners. Does the cabinet secretary agree that mitigating bad decisions cannot go on indefinitely and that it would be much better if powers over decisions on the regulation of energy were held here in our own independent Parliament? [*Interruption.*]

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hear groans from Scottish Conservative and Scottish Labour members as we talk about the fact that we continue to mitigate. That says a lot about where the debate is at the moment.

I share the member's frustration that we are, once again, talking about mitigation. As I said in my statement, we are already spending £134 million in this financial year to mitigate some of the worst excesses of UK Government policies. Not only is the fact that we are having to do that again deeply disappointing, but it is a deeply expensive way to try to protect people. If only this Parliament had the ability to make more such decisions without being shackled to Westminster spending decisions, we could do so much more. Until that day comes, however, we will continue to do what we can to protect pensioners, those on low incomes and, indeed, everyone else who relies on social security, which is an investment in our people.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the block grant adjustment for the household support fund is £41 million, so the Scottish Government will not be spending any more money out of its own pocket this year? Will she also confirm that no more money will go directly into people's pockets in this financial year? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government has to look carefully at how quickly we can provide support to people. As I said in my statement, that is particularly important when the UK Government gives no forewarning of such decisions. The quickest way that we can do that is to use something such as the Scottish welfare fund, which is an established practice that we have used to assist people in the past—for example, during Covid. That is an important way in which we can assist people with an immediate crisis. As I mentioned, we are doing more to help in a systemic way, too.

I note again that, with the budget on the way just next week, Jeremy Balfour seems to say in his questioning that he wants to spend more at the same time as those on his front bench want the Government to make tax cuts. I am afraid that that does not make economic sense.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary's statement will come as a relief to pensioners and low-income households in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency and across Scotland, who face financial uncertainty this winter as a result of brutal Labour UK Government cuts. That said, does the cabinet secretary share my frustration that such significant Scottish Government resources must,

once again, be directed towards mitigating Westminster austerity measures such as the winter fuel payment cut, the benefit cap and the bedroom tax, despite Keir Starmer's promise of change?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Stuart McMillan is quite right to point out not just the need for mitigation but its financial cost. He pointed to the work to mitigate the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. That is the decision that we have taken, and I believe that it is the right one, as is our decision to mitigate, again, today.

However, that money could be spent in a variety of different ways, such as on anti-poverty measures, education or the national health service. As we look to the budget next week, the fact that the Scottish Government has had to continue to mitigate—first under the Conservatives and now under Labour—requires us to make difficult decisions in other portfolios. We take that responsibility seriously and, as a member of a minority Government, I hope that the other parties in the Parliament will rise to their responsibility and ensure that a budget is passed next week, so that we can continue to support people in difficult times over the winter.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): More than half of older people in Scotland live in homes that have poor levels of energy efficiency, with an energy performance certificate rating of D or below, at a time when, under this Government, fuel poverty among those in later life is at a record level. Why is there such low awareness of the Government's energy efficiency schemes? According to the Chartered Institute of Building, awareness levels among older people are as low as 39 per cent, which means that far too few of them benefit from the schemes that the cabinet secretary has talked about.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In the past decade, our energy efficiency schemes have supported 150,000 households that were either in or at risk of fuel poverty. Given that Colin Smyth has talked about fuel poverty, I hope that he bears it in mind that one reason for fuel poverty is energy costs. Labour said that it would cut those, yet there are further increases just as Labour is taking money away from pensioners.

We need to ensure that people are aware of the schemes that are available, but I hope that Colin Smyth will join me in support of the announcements that have been made today about further extending investment in the warmer homes Scotland scheme.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Despite Labour's pre-election promise to slash bills by £300, household energy prices rose by £149 in October and are set to rise again in

January. It is vital that we work to make pricing fairer, and I welcome the Scottish Government's work so far on a social tariff. Will the cabinet secretary say more about how a social tariff might operate and how it would help to lower costs?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Jackie Dunbar is right to point out the important role that a social tariff could play in assisting those who are either in fuel poverty or at risk of fuel poverty. She will be aware of the work that Scottish Government ministers are taking forward on a social tariff, including the working group that has been set up and is meeting. I think that it is due to meet again in December.

Of course, the ability to deliver on that social tariff comes down to the UK Government. If it continues to be determined to take money away from pensioners, I hope that it will at least act on the work that is being progressed in that working group, and deliver on that social tariff.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I welcome the additional investment in the Scottish welfare fund and the warmer homes Scotland scheme. However, temperatures have already plummeted, and people are already being forced beyond the choice between heating their homes and eating. How will the Government ensure that the money will get to those who need it—this year, right now?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Maggie Chapman is right. We not only need to deliver on the funding that we have announced today; we need to ensure that we support Scotland's councils as they administer the Scottish welfare fund. That is exactly why, as part of the £20 million package, we have recognised that we will need to support councils with the administration costs of doing so. I give Maggie Chapman an assurance that that has been taken account of, so that we can support our councils to get that money out the door as quickly as possible.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Liberal Democrats have opposed the cuts to the winter fuel payment, so we welcome the statement and the change in direction as a step in the right direction, especially given Scotland's colder climate.

Opposition members are often challenged by Government ministers about where the money should come from for particular policies. That is a fair question to ask. For the sake of clarity, will the cabinet secretary say where the money came from to properly fund this policy?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Rennie is quite right to put that challenge back to me. I have often put that challenge to him in the chamber and elsewhere.

As I mentioned, the budget will be announced next week. The support package that has been announced today was discussed in Cabinet as part of the Scottish Government budget. I ask Mr Rennie to wait just a bit longer, because the announcements on the rest of the Scottish Government budget will be made by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government next week.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Like many in the chamber, I welcome—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Grahame.

Christine Grahame: That was terribly rude.

I welcome the announcement. Unfortunately, this Government is having to put in place more mitigations. As I understand it, there are two categories of pensioners: those who are on pension credit, who will get £200 to £300, depending on whether they are single, their age and so on; and the rest of us—that includes me—who will get £100. However, 40 per cent of those who are entitled to pension credit do not receive it. That is no fault of the Government, because that has been the situation for a very long time. The Department for Work and Pensions has those figures, so I assume that that 40 per cent of pensioners will just receive the £100 payment, which is fine. However, how on earth can we increase pension credit uptake? If we do not do that, some pensioners will be left out in the cold.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Christine Grahame is right to point to the need to encourage the uptake of pension credit. She will be aware that this Government has a benefit uptake strategy—it is the only one in the UK—and we are determined to encourage those who are entitled to benefits to apply for them.

Pension credit is a reserved benefit, so it is not part of the benefit uptake strategy. However, regardless of the fact that it is not our responsibility, we have tried to encourage further uptake of pension credit through Social Security Scotland and other public agencies, and I thank our local authority partners for their work on that, too.

Belatedly, the UK Government is delivering a pension credit uptake strategy, which is welcome, but much more can be done. In the main, the responsibility for the matter lies with the UK Government. However, we continue to play our part, and I am sure that Christine Grahame would remind me often that we should do that.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I note that the minister has, yet again, sought to turn the

issue into a constitutional grievance. Cynically, the SNP would like us to believe—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: —that benefit mitigation such as that announced today is necessary only because we remain part of the UK. However, is it not the case that the Scottish Government can offer those benefits only because of the Barnett funding formula? That formula gives her Government £2,200 of additional money to spend on benefits and services for every man, woman and child in Scotland today.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Hoy might wish to reflect on the constitutional aspects of this matter—I certainly do. We disagree on the issue and we will continue to do so. However, we have to agree on the fact that this Government's budget is set because of what happens in the UK Government. If, as it chose to do last year, the UK Government wants, with no notice and no consultation, to take more than £150 million out of our budget, in-year, there is nothing that we can do about it. I do not find that to be acceptable. It is disappointing—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: —that Opposition party members seem to think that that is okay. I would have hoped that we could all agree on protecting our pensioners or, indeed, the budget that comes to this Parliament. It is sad that Mr Hoy refuses to do so.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Freezing temperatures and significant snowfall in the past week left many households in the Highlands and Islands struggling to meet the cost of heating their homes after yet another energy price rise. Labour promised to slash energy bills, but prices have skyrocketed under Labour. While the Scottish Government works to protect pensioners from the worst of Westminster austerity, the UK Government has failed to act and has instead chosen to cut support. Therefore, does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government must follow the example of the SNP Government and take meaningful action to tackle rising bills?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Emma Roddick is quite right to point out that meaningful action is required, and that is exactly what this Government has delivered today. She is also right to point out that the UK Government should do likewise. It is not too late for UK ministers to change their mind, reflect on their poor decision and come back with a universal payment. That would be the right thing to do.

In the questions and answers following today's statement, we have already had discussion and debate about other aspects of meaningful action that the UK Government can undertake. Whether it involves the social tariff or protecting people from increases in energy costs, that is action that the UK Government must take responsibility for. While it continues to ignore the need for that action, we will get on with the action that we can take, as announced today.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Has the cabinet secretary any advice for constituents who have worked hard all their lives for pension entitlements but do not qualify for pension credits? I very much welcome the announcement of the £100, but it will not go far enough to support elderly and vulnerable people and keep them warm this winter.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with Rachael Hamilton that there is a great deal that could be improved with regard to pension credits. It is a shame that the Conservative Government did not do so when it was in power.

We are keen to ensure that older people and other people can receive advice to assist them on their rights. That is exactly why we make provision for welfare rights advice and fund citizens advice bureaux to provide that.

However, I say again to Rachael Hamilton that she cannot come to the chamber and ask us to spend more money when—unless I am mistaken—next week, we will hear that her party wants us to make tax cuts. She cannot have it both ways.

A96 Corridor Review

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on the publication of the A96 corridor review. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:12

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I begin my statement by expressing my sincerest sympathies to the families of anyone who has been killed or injured on our roads. In particular, my thoughts are with the family and friends of those involved in recent incidents, including the fatal accident on the A96 east of Brodie on 11 November.

Road safety remains of paramount importance to the Government, and that is reflected in our ambition to have zero deaths or serious injuries on our roads by 2050, with an interim target to halve the number of people killed or seriously injured on the road by 2030.

The Government is also whole-heartedly committed to improving transport infrastructure in the north and north-east of Scotland, including the A96 corridor. In recent years, we have invested almost £1 billion in delivering many improvements to the strategic road network in that area, including the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the A92/A96 Haudagain improvement, the A96 Fochabers and Mosstodloch bypass and the A96 Inveramsay bridge, among others. In addition, the £3.7 billion A9 dualling programme is moving forward, with the construction contract for the Tomatin to Moy section awarded in July this year. The procurement competition for the Tay crossing to Ballinluig section is continuing, with contract award scheduled for summer 2025.

Members will be aware that the Bute house agreement required that an A96 corridor review be conducted. Although that agreement has ended, MSPs of all parties have continued to call for that review to be published, and today I am fulfilling an obligation to publish the full A96 corridor review for consideration by MSPs and the public.

The corridor review includes extensive and detailed appraisal and assessment work that has been undertaken by Transport Scotland. The extensive review reporting consists of more than 2,000 pages, and it is my intention to invite interested MSPs to a round-table briefing session with me and Transport Scotland officials. I consider it appropriate to provide the public and other stakeholders with ample opportunity to fully consider the findings from the detailed work that Transport Scotland has undertaken before

providing their feedback. I note that the review itself contains information on full dualling. The review will therefore be subject to a 12-week consultation on its contents.

The Scottish Government's current plan is to fully dual the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen and, as part of that process, Transport Scotland has been undertaking a transparent and evidence-based review of the programme.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry—I would not normally do this—but can you say whether it is in order for the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to deliberately mislead the Parliament? Anyone who has read the review document knows that the Scottish National Party Government is no longer committed to fully dualling the A96. Whatever the cabinet secretary is saying today, it is not the truth, because the document says that the Government is backsliding on its commitment and is not going to fully dual that road.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not, strictly speaking, a point of order. The cabinet secretary is in the middle of making her statement. After she—

Douglas Ross: She is not telling the truth.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I ask you to withdraw that remark.

Douglas Ross: I will do so, simply because I want to ask a question later.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Lovely—thank you. We will stop there.

Please resume, cabinet secretary. We can listen to the cabinet secretary, and then members will have the opportunity to put their questions to her.

Fiona Hyslop: The A96 corridor review has been undertaken in accordance with the Scottish transport appraisal guidance, which is the best practice and objective-led approach to transport appraisal.

The review has considered the transport problems and opportunities along the A96 corridor, the changing policy context—including a focus on making better use of existing assets—and the response to climate change, along with other relevant considerations such as aspirations for development. In addition, the review has included a climate compatibility assessment, along with other statutory assessments.

Appropriate and effective stakeholder and public engagement has been undertaken by Transport Scotland at key stages during the review process. Given the effects of the climate emergency and Covid-19 on travel, the views of residents, stakeholders and businesses have been vital to help the analysis and to understand any impacts

and associated changes to travel patterns along the corridor.

The problems and opportunities that were identified through the initial consultation in 2022 have been instrumental in developing the review's appraisal and assessment criteria, which ensures that vital public feedback has been appropriately considered throughout the process. Members will recall that the initial four-week public consultation, which was undertaken as a key element of the review, generated unprecedented interest, with almost 4,700 responses received and more than 11,000 suggested options. Given the sheer volume of responses received and the high number of options that that generated, it was only right to carefully examine the extensive feedback from the members of the public we serve and all the options that were generated as part of the initial appraisal exercise.

The initial appraisal rationalised the multitude of options that were generated, retaining 16 options for preliminary appraisal. That key stage then considered those options and rejected the ones that were found to perform poorly against the review's appraisal criteria. Fourteen remaining options, which included full dualling, progressed to the detailed appraisal stage. The appraisal work that was undertaken recognised that the identified problems and opportunities along the corridor would be best addressed through an area-based or geographical approach. That allowed the development of a range of packages addressing common problems and opportunities across similar locations throughout the A96 corridor to be appraised in detail.

Transport Scotland has now concluded that detailed appraisal stage and has considered the relative performance of seven packages of improvements for the corridor, including full dualling of the A96. That detailed appraisal of all the evidence identifies that there is an optimal refined package. That refined package includes a spread of interventions across all modes of transport, supporting a multimodal approach to transport investment within the corridor.

The package includes bypasses of Elgin and Keith and targeted road safety improvements; an A96 electric corridor to improve alternative refuelling facilities; rail improvements to reduce passenger journey times and enhance freight facilities; improvements in towns and villages to encourage more people to walk and cycle locally; investment in flexible transport opportunities to improve connectivity in areas with limited access to existing public transport; and improvements to public transport interchange facilities.

The refined package cost estimate is in the range of £501 million to £1 billion at 2022 prices, which compares with a range of £2.5 billion to £5

billion for dualling the A96 from the east of Nairn to Aberdeen. It is clear that it will not be possible to dual all of the A96 by 2030. The Scottish Government currently favours fully dualling the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen. *[Interruption.]* The evidence from the A96 corridor review suggests that there may be a different approach to provide alternative solutions with a more cost-effective and affordable budget. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, cabinet secretary.

I will not have a running commentary. I made it clear at the beginning that the statement would be made without interventions or interruptions. I expect that my instruction in that regard will be heeded.

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that we gather the public's views before making a final decision on the programme so, today, we are launching a 12-week consultation on the outcomes from the review. That will provide people, businesses and organisations with the opportunity to fully consider the findings from the detailed work that Transport Scotland has undertaken and to provide vital feedback on it. As I made clear, the review was a requirement of the Bute house agreement and has been anticipated and expected by MSPs.

The review, which was published today, extends to more than 2,000 pages of reporting and clearly demonstrates the significant work that has been undertaken to inform future investment in a key transport corridor. Importantly, the material that is now available on Transport Scotland's website clearly sets out the performance of the refined package alongside that of the current plan to fully dual the route. That will enable all interested parties to consider the respective performance of potential improvements to the A96 corridor, including full dualling, compare them and be fully informed of the options, before sharing their views.

I appreciate that there is a huge amount of information for everyone, including elected members, to digest. That is why I will hold a further round-table meeting with interested MSPs during the consultation period to give them the appropriate time to review and fully consider the material, ask questions and give their views.

I also want to update the Parliament on the dualling of the A96 from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass, which is separate from the A96 corridor review process, as it has already received ministerial approval. The completion of the statutory process for that A96 dualling scheme earlier this year clears the way for ministers to take forward the final stage of the process to acquire the land that is required to construct the dualling scheme. Transport Scotland is now

pressing ahead with the procedural steps to make that happen in the coming months. Work has also commenced to determine the most suitable procurement option for delivering the work on the A96 Inverness to Nairn including Nairn bypass dualling scheme. Thereafter, a timetable for progress can be set, in line with available budgets.

The Government is reiterating its commitment to the people of the north and north-east of Scotland. The Government's position has not changed. The current favoured position is to fully dual the A96, and we are already starting the dualling process from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. The outcomes from the review that Transport Scotland has undertaken have been published today in draft for public consultation, and no final decision has been made.

Feedback from people and stakeholders will inform the Scottish Government's final decision on how best to take forward improvements to the A96 while balancing the demands of the challenging economic climate, current policy and the climate emergency. That feedback will assist in planning how improvements along the corridor are prioritised and will inform our timescales for the wider A96, following the major and on-going roads investment and wider investment in the north and north-east of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question could press their request-to-speak buttons.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I also pay tribute to the hundreds of people who have been injured and have lost their lives on the A96, and to the emergency workers who are left picking up the pieces.

Communities that use the A96 will rightly feel betrayed by the cabinet secretary's response today. The Scottish National Party is once again kicking a decision on the A96 further down the road, despite committing to dualling it in 2011, 13 years ago. In the general election campaign, and less than three hours ago, the First Minister said that he was committed to dualling the A96. However, the cabinet secretary, instead of fulfilling those promises to communities on the A96, is betraying them.

The cabinet secretary admits in her statement that the SNP Government will break its promise and that the A96 will not be dualled by 2030. Worse still, the door has been left open to rowing back on that promise entirely. That would be unacceptable to communities that rely on that

road. Will the cabinet secretary jettison the so-called refined approach and finally keep the SNP's promise to dual the A96 between Aberdeen and Inverness?

Fiona Hyslop: I should point out that, with the agreement of Parliament and the Presiding Officer, we were able to provide a response to a Government-initiated question earlier this morning. I recognise that that is not enough time for everyone to look at the 2,000 pages, but it was an attempt to respond to requests to have more time for consideration.

In my statement today, I have made it quite clear, and I think that it is obvious, in particular if we look at the financial pressures that the Scottish Government is under, that meeting the target by 2030 is not possible.

In 2011, it was a different time. I remember the financial crash and Gordon Brown's first budget, and subsequent Conservative Government budgets. At that time, I do not think anyone would have anticipated the capital collapse that subsequently happened in our financial provision, for a variety of reasons that I do not necessarily need to relate today. That has caused immense issues.

However, I can say that we are commencing the dualling of the A96 with the Inverness to Nairn section, including the Nairn bypass, and the Inshes to Smithton provision. That is our commitment on the issue.

With regard to jettisoning something that has barely been published—it was published only a few hours ago—there was a commitment made by this Parliament, and MSPs from all parties, including from the Conservatives, had asked for that information to be published. That is what we have done, and there is now a 12-week period in which people can have a look at the detail of that content and provide feedback.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement, and I associate myself and my party with the remarks regarding the loss of life on the A96, in particular the most recent tragic events.

It is now 13 years since the SNP promised to dual the A96. In that time, we have had three transport secretaries and three First Ministers, but today we find out that there is no chance of that promise being fulfilled, over fully two decades. It is just another symptom of an incompetent Government that has broken countless promises and has long since run out of steam. Is the cabinet secretary really satisfied with the pace of the project? I note many of the technicalities—as she described—that are involved, but, on behalf of constituents, I would like to hear some contrition

today. Will she offer an apology for the interminable delays?

Fiona Hyslop: The member asks whether I am satisfied. Of course I am not satisfied, but I am also not satisfied with the impact of successive capital restrictions on our budget. I am also dissatisfied with some of the decisions that the Government had to make when it came to power in 2007—for example, when the member's party and others insisted that we invested in the Edinburgh trams project rather than the A9. I am also concerned about the consequences of Brexit—a Brexit that is still supported by the Labour Party.

Those issues have all had consequences for the capital provision of this Government. Despite that fact, we have made major capital infrastructure investments, many of them in the north-east of Scotland. For example, the SNP Government delivered the Aberdeen western peripheral route. It was thought of and planned, and it might have been done before, but it never was. It took the SNP Government coming to power to deliver on that.

Despite all those pressures, we have managed to make infrastructure investments. Some of that has not happened at the pace that I would have wanted, but I think that any reasonable person, looking at the pressures and the experience of the past 10 years, would understand that a timeline that was reasonable in 2011 is not reasonable or deliverable now, and certainly not when we look at the budget position in which the Scottish Government currently finds itself.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the recommitment from the cabinet secretary today to the full dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen. It is a vital project for many reasons, not least road safety and rural connectivity. The Nairn bypass, in particular, has the potential to alleviate many issues, including reducing congestion and pollution in the town and opening up potential for active travel. Can the cabinet secretary speak to that part of the programme in particular? Is she willing to commit to bringing forward the construction of the bypass to as soon as possible within the overall timescales?

Fiona Hyslop: There are a number of elements, particularly around the A96 from Inverness to Nairn and the Nairn bypass. I am acutely aware of the request from the people of Nairn, and I attended a public meeting that the local paper organised as part of their campaign. From that experience, it was clear to me that people wanted to see the Nairn bypass completed first. That would have consequences, both in time and cost, but I recognise that the road cuts through the town and causes enormous delays for those who work

there. I also heard about the experience of schools, such as Rosebank primary school, whose requirements were identified. I have asked officials to look at whether that prioritisation would be possible and how it would impact on the timetable.

The other aspect of that section of the dualling programme is looking at the type of procurement. That will determine the timetable and whether we combine different contracts to make a larger contract for one sort of procurement, or whether we split up the scheme and have separate, smaller contracts. That is possibly what we would have to do for the Nairn bypass, but that would also have consequences. As that part of the A96 dualling progresses, I will keep Parliament informed of those decisions.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): One hundred and twenty-eight people have been killed or injured on this killer road since 2021. The report acknowledges that the full dualling, which was promised 13 years and 16 transport ministers ago, “would provide greater accident reductions”.

That stands to reason when Transport Scotland figures show that the risk of a fatal or serious collision is 432 per cent higher on single carriageways. However, as the report goes on to say, full dualling is being abandoned because it

“would have a much greater negative impact on visual amenity”.

Is the cabinet secretary content to let the carnage continue for the sake of aesthetics and abject ignorance of the needs of the north-east?

Fiona Hyslop: That question does not do credit to Mr Kerr, who I know takes these issues very seriously. He has obviously looked at the summary report, and that is why I think that we need time to study the 2,000 pages of the full report. It is quite clear from the report that it is with regard to the safety measure that the merits of full dualling have precedence. There are other measures in the report, and that is in accordance with the Scottish transport appraisal guidance. That is the normal, objective way in which we look at those things.

Since 2019, there have been a total of 17 deaths on the road. We know that deaths, unfortunately, happen on many roads, and I am particularly concerned about how improvements can take place in the meantime on a whole load of different roads, including on junctions in different areas.

However, from the answers that I have given to him before, Mr Kerr knows that many factors are involved in accidents. Obviously, police investigations bring us statistics, and that is why we are looking at delivering the work. From the work that is taking place at Tomatin to Moy on the

A9, people will start to see that we are progressing dualling projects with available funding. That is why it is important that we give the matter due consideration, recognise what the benefits of dualling are compared with other measures and give Mr Kerr's constituents the opportunity to feed back on that during the 12-week process.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

The statement has been met with white fury from my constituents, including long-standing SNP members, who are aware that the pledge is three decades old.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the report is flawed? It started off with a foregone conclusion. As far as I can see, the strategic business case does not contain a reference to the renewables opportunities in the north-east and Highlands over the next century, when we require safe, decent roads of the same standard as those in the central belt.

In the Jacobs analysis of 2022, by seven to one, those who responded—4,800 people—said that they wanted a dual carriageway. How many more consultations do we need before we accept the voice and verdict of the people in the north of Scotland? If we do not, how, in all good faith, can this be considered anything other than a presage to total betrayal?

Fiona Hyslop: In terms of the report, I made it clear that I had an obligation to carry through the request of other MSPs of all parties to publish what was commissioned as part of the Bute house agreement with the Green Party. That has now been produced.

Some people thought that it would simply be a climate change comparator. It has gone through the required appraisal. We combined two sets of the appraisals to ensure that we could move forward at pace. That includes the first one, which Fergus Ewing referred to—the 2022 one—and then the carrying-on of that consideration.

It is important to consider the renewables industry and what is required. That is why I have also commissioned advice, particularly on what it might mean in relation to Ardersier. Only this morning, I had a meeting with SSEN to discuss these very issues around how our transport infrastructure can support the growth in the renewables sector.

Those are important points, but I have an obligation of transparency to come to the Parliament and publish what was required as part of the A96 corridor review, and that is what I have done today.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am not sure whether Opposition members have short memories or selective amnesia. The SNP

has reconnected Kintore and Laurencekirk to the railway. The Aberdeen bypass, which had been spoken about for 50 years, has been delivered. The Haudagain improvement in my constituency, now named the Brian Adam Road, has been delivered. My party has delivered for the north-east before, and it will continue to do so in the future. Given the enormous interest in the subject, how can members of the public make their views known, and how will they be kept aware of opportunities to raise their views?

Fiona Hyslop: Jackie Dunbar makes an important point about the investment that this party in government has made and delivered on in relation to the north and north-east of Scotland.

The expense and priorities in my budget are primarily in the Highlands and Islands and the north of Scotland. Members will know that MSPs of all parties want investment in their part of Scotland, but I recognise that the initial focus in my term as transport secretary has been in those particular areas of Scotland. I recognise what the member says.

As to engagement, Transport Scotland's website has found ways of developing a system through which people can provide their feedback and also view what is a complex area in terms of information that can be downloaded and assessed. The point of that engagement is absolute.

I encourage members, whatever their views, to ensure that their constituents are made aware of the publication of the report, which includes the full dualling of the A96, and to provide their feedback on what has been set out in that commissioned corridor review, which was part of the agreement that was made some time ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grant joins us remotely.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

Inverness is the only city in Scotland not to be joined to the rest of Scotland by dual carriageway, and that is unacceptable. The cabinet secretary knows that the people of Nairn have been crying out for their bypass for decades, with the town totally gridlocked at peak times. Those promises to them have been broken.

The people of Nairn need to understand today when they can expect their bypass and dual carriageway to Inverness to be built. If the cabinet secretary delays providing that timeframe until the infrastructure investment plan is published, they will have to wait a whole year for an update, and that is simply not acceptable.

Fiona Hyslop: On the decisions around what happens with Inverness and Nairn, I was keen to ensure that we completed the statutory

requirements for not only Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass dualling, but Inshes to Smithton.

Rhoda Grant made the point about the dualling aspect, and that is why that aspect of the dualling is also being commenced. That enables Transport Scotland to purchase the land that is required for the work to be carried out.

As part of our work on Inverness to Nairn, consideration has to be given to the feasibility and attractiveness of either combining that scheme with adjacent schemes to form larger contracts, or splitting it and delivering through smaller contracts, such as the Nairn bypass. We also have to consider—as was set out at the public meeting that I attended in Nairn—whether we proceed with a design and build method or a mutual investment model.

The member will know that we are already examining the opportunities of using a mutual investment model for parts of the A9. I reassure her that we are doing the same exercise in parallel for the Inverness to Nairn bypass, and on completion of the exercise we can provide a reliable timetable. To do so in advance of that would be speculation, because, as my official said at the Nairn public meeting, the timetable will depend on whether there is to be a design and build through capital approach, or whether funding will be delivered through a mutual investment model.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I warmly welcome the statement and the review. It is evidence based, particularly on the issue of road safety, and it has had the input of communities as well. However, it is quite clear from the conclusions of the review that spending upwards of £5,000 million on full dualling of the A96 would be a waste of money, and that the preferred package that has been put forward—of bypasses at Elgin and Keith, road safety improvements and investment in rail and public transport, which are all deliverable for one fifth of the cost of full dualling—is the right way forward.

When will the Scottish Government be able to accelerate the investment in that preferred package, and so deliver for communities and deliver the road safety improvements that are needed to save lives?

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that Mark Ruskell welcomes the review. It was a part of the Bute house agreement that was requested by the Green Party, and that has now been delivered.

The review sets out a range of different provisions in what has been called the “refined package”. I want to hear not just from MSPs, but from the public on what their views are on it.

Following the determination of those views, we will be able to assess the way forward.

Our view is that we want to fully dual the A96. We have constraints of budget, so it is reasonable to look at the timescale and acknowledge that that will not be delivered by 2030. However, all those factors have to be put in place in order for the Government to look forward and plan for investments for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Beatrice Wishart is joining us remotely.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I associate myself with what has been said about those who have sadly lost their lives on the A96.

While the cabinet secretary reaffirms that the Scottish Government's position is still in favour of full dualling on the A96 route, many in the north-east and along the route will have serious concerns today that full dualling will not go ahead after publication of the review. We want to ensure that the voices of the communities along the corridor are listened to.

The A96 currently runs through the town centres of Elgin and Keith, and the *Northern Scot* found that the Forres to Elgin section of the A96 is the most dangerous section of the road. People in Elgin and Keith are keen that bypasses are built to improve safety for all road users. Can the cabinet secretary give a guarantee today that the Elgin and Keith bypasses will go ahead?

Fiona Hyslop: The member cuts to the issue of priorities within the works that will be undertaken to improve the A96. The point about the Elgin and Keith bypasses is well made.

The member also makes a point about which parts of the road need their improvement works delivered first. As I have said, seven packages of improvements have been identified. Some are to the road, some are to the rail and some are to other areas in the preferred route.

However, whatever happens with regard to improvements on the A96, I would be very surprised if the bypassing of Keith and Elgin did not come back from the consultation as a priority for constituents along that corridor—although I have to wait to hear what people say.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As members have already referenced, road safety is of paramount importance. The Scottish Government is required to be cognisant of the challenging economic climate in which it is currently operating and of the climate emergency, which is an existential one. How does the Government intend to balance those different facets when taking this piece of work forward?

Fiona Hyslop: For Transport Scotland, as the Scottish Government's agency, to assess aspects of any transport infrastructure for investment, it requires the different stages of the STAG appraisal to take place. That appraisal combines the issues of climate compatibility and safety.

We can secure safety in different ways—dualling can be one route. However, other routes also have to be provided for. That is what we intend to do as part of the on-going road safety priority work that I am undertaking, along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities, our transport officers and, importantly, Police Scotland.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Two years late and at a cost of millions of pounds, the A96 corridor review is an absolute sham and a disgrace. Is it not telling that the only parties who are welcoming it today are the SNP and the Greens, whose votes the SNP needs in the Parliament?

The cabinet secretary's statement and the entire SNP Government have been a disgrace, too, because—make no mistake—it is as clear as day from the review that the Government is no longer committed to dualling the A96 in full. That is the ultimate betrayal of my constituents in Moray, the Highlands and the north-east, who were promised time and again that that road would be a priority, when it clearly is not. I have not believed a word that the cabinet secretary has said. If she is going to convince me that the SNP will dual the A96 in full, can she tell the chamber when it will do so?

Fiona Hyslop: Douglas Ross might not have been able to adjust which Parliament he wants to be in—

Douglas Ross: When?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, please listen to the cabinet secretary give the answer to the question.

Fiona Hyslop: There is a serious point here. I have just explained that the method of procurement, which could be a mutual investment model or a design and build model, and the priorities—which of the Elgin bypass or the Keith bypass would be done first—would go into a plan to determine what the timetable for dualling would be. I have been as open as I can and said that we should acknowledge that the original target of 2030 for full dualling—

Douglas Ross: So, when?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second. Mr Ross, I have already explained that when somebody has the floor, other people who are in their seats do not. Please resume, cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that—

Douglas Ross: She is supposed to answer the question!

Fiona Hyslop: There might be a place for barracking behaviour in some Parliaments, but it should not happen here—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am in the chair and I will deal with that, cabinet secretary. We are running out of time and I want to give two more members the opportunity to ask their questions. Please just respond to the point and I can call the next speaker. Thank you.

Fiona Hyslop: I will inform the Parliament of the outcome of the 12-week consultation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have two more speakers and I would like to take both, so I need some co-operation to have succinct questions and answers.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): How will the acute fiscal challenges that the Scottish Government is contending with—bequeathed by the Tories to the north-east and the rest of the country—impact on important capital infrastructure projects, such as improving the safety of the A96?

Fiona Hyslop: Any reasonable person looking at the economic and financial situation in which the UK continues to find itself because of self-inflicted circumstances—for example, Brexit—or the consequences of the cost of living crisis and other issues, such as the impact of cost inflation, particularly on construction, will recognise not only that there is a limit to the amount of capital available for any major investment project, but that, when we embark on such a project, its cost can rise.

With the good news that the renewables sector is growing in Scotland, one of the issues with which we have to contend is that its demand for construction and skills will put pressure on all construction projects, in relation to the value for money that we can get from them. That is the realistic position that we are in. However, I have given my commitment to the improvements to the A96. We are already delivering the additional dualling to the A9 and I have set out that the dualling of the A96 from Inverness to Nairn is commencing. We are progressing with that process and I will keep the Parliament informed of it.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The First Minister, at today's First Minister's question time, gave a cast-iron guarantee on dualling the A9 and the A96 but, currently, the cabinet secretary only favours it. Will she go along with her First Minister? I ask this in the hope that highlanders will get what has been

promised for many years: will you give us a cast-iron guarantee, as your boss did?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Mountain.

Fiona Hyslop: On the programme to deliver the A9 that I have been supportive of, first as minister and then as cabinet secretary, people can see clear evidence of that. The important part of it was to ensure that the finances for it were planned for and set out as a baked-in aspect of our budgets.

The challenge for the A96 is the quantum of money that we are talking about, which, again, is £2.5 billion to £5 billion for full dualling. That will provide challenges, not least in the timetable of what can be delivered and when. As part of the A96 dualling, we are delivering on the Inverness to Nairn bypass, which is an important start in what we can do.

It would be remiss of me not to publish the report that was asked for as part of the Bute house agreement, and a number of MSPs, including Conservative members, demanded to see the review. If they wanted to see it just to dismiss it within hours of its publication, I do not think that they are giving service to their constituents. I hope that members will ensure that their constituents are engaged in the 12-week consultation.

Housing (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15605, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the Housing (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:52

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): In March this year, the bill was introduced to the Parliament to bring forward a package of reforms that will help to ensure that people have a safe, secure and affordable place to live. We know that a good-quality, affordable and well-regulated housing system can help to tackle poverty, including for families with children, as well as promote equality and support wellbeing.

Eradicating child poverty remains a Government priority, and I am sure that we can all agree that having a home can make a direct contribution to that. That is why ensuring that families can have safe, secure and affordable homes that meet their needs is part of our approach to tackling the housing emergency.

Scotland needs a thriving private rented sector that offers good-quality, affordable housing options and values the benefit that investment in rented property delivers. The Government has a strong record of acting to protect tenants, and Scotland has some of the strongest tenants' rights in the world. The introduction of a long-term system of rent control for Scotland will build on that record.

The latest Scottish Government statistics show that the average advertised rent for two-bedroom properties increased by 6.2 per cent in the 12 months ending in September 2024, which was more than double the average level of inflation during that period. There was variation across areas of Scotland, with average rent increases of 14 per cent in Lothian. The scale of private rent rises across Scotland demonstrates the need for action to tackle rising rent levels.

People who rent their homes are more likely to live in poverty, be financially vulnerable and live on low incomes compared with those who own their home outright or with a mortgage. That is why the Government is deeply disappointed at the United Kingdom Government's decision in its recent budget to freeze the local housing allowance.

The principle of introducing rent controls has broad support in Scotland, with recent YouGov polling showing that 82 per cent of respondents supported their introduction, including 61 per cent of Conservative voters who responded.

Throughout the stage 1 process, we have been listening to stakeholders and have heard their calls for more certainty on the effect of rent control. We have acted, with stakeholders welcoming the clarity that was provided by the recent statement that confirmed the form of the rent cap and the consultation in spring 2025, which will support consideration of how powers to exempt certain types of property from rent control could be used.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I have a question about rent controls. The Scottish Government has decided to maintain rent controls between tenancies. How will that help developers and people in the private rented sector who are trying to navigate the Scottish Government's proposals?

Paul McLennan: I will come on to that point later in my speech. One of the most important points when it comes to the situation between tenancies is to make sure that we do not have a two-tier rental system. However, I will address the issue of investment later in my speech.

In spring 2025, we will carry out a consultation to support consideration of how powers to exempt certain types of property from rent controls could be used. That will include consideration of how new housing that is built or developed specifically for private rent, including for mid-market rent, would be treated and of the circumstances in which rents might be increased above the level of the rent cap.

Although we consider that any exemptions from rent control should be set out in secondary legislation, we are taking steps to hold the consultation early, while the bill is still being progressed, to ensure that those regulations can be laid at the earliest opportunity if the bill is passed.

The bill proposes wider reforms of the rented sector, which include a range of changes that will help to improve how the rented sector operates and the renting experience of tenants. In recognition of the fact that there are certain circumstances and times of year when being evicted can be particularly problematic, the bill imposes a duty on the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland and courts to consider whether the enforcement of an eviction should be delayed, except in certain circumstances. In cases of antisocial or criminal behaviour, it would rarely be reasonable to delay an eviction.

The bill will help to improve the renting experience by strengthening the right of private residential tenants to make certain changes to their home and by giving most private and social tenants the right to ask to keep a pet and not be unreasonably refused. Last week, I visited the Scottish SPCA's Edinburgh rescue centre and

heard how the measures in the bill will make a real difference in helping families to keep their pets.

The measures in the bill also include changes that reform how civil damages for unlawful eviction are calculated and that make it easier for a tenant to seek damages for an unlawful eviction. In addition, the bill will enable unclaimed tenancy deposit funds to be used for the benefit of private rented sector tenants.

On domestic abuse, the bill is designed to provide an additional mechanism for joint tenants to end a tenancy in situations in which there is no mutual agreement. That will ensure that no joint tenant can be trapped in a tenancy indefinitely against their will, which is important in cases in which domestic abuse is a factor.

We know that men and women experience homelessness differently. Our response to their housing needs is also different. Our focus on domestic abuse is key, as domestic abuse is one of the main reasons why women make homelessness applications. Twenty-three per cent of the women who sought homelessness assistance in 2023-24 cited as their reason for doing so violent or abusive disputes in the household.

The bill will update the definition of domestic abuse in relation to housing allocations and homelessness legislation to recognise the wide range of behaviours that constitute domestic abuse, which include coercive control. The bill will also put a duty on social landlords to outline in their domestic abuse policy how they will support tenants who are experiencing domestic abuse to prevent them from becoming homeless.

The measures in the bill aim to put a renewed focus on homelessness prevention so that individuals and families do not have to experience the trauma and disruption to lives that homelessness causes. We want to help to keep people in their homes, whenever that is possible and appropriate, and, in the longer term, we want to ensure that there is less pressure on housing supply and public resources.

The measures in the bill have been guided by the principles of shared public responsibility, earlier intervention across systems and the provision of more choice and control over housing options through avoiding the crisis of homelessness. The new ask and act duties for a range of relevant bodies in areas such as health and justice are bold, and they reach further than similar duties that have been introduced elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Crucially, the source of the ask and act duties lies in the recommendations of those who have lived experience of homelessness, who pointed to the

missed opportunities to prevent homelessness that they had encountered.

Although Scotland has some of the strongest rights in the world for people who become homeless, the bill gives us an important opportunity to introduce measures to help to better protect people who are threatened with homelessness and to shift the focus to early intervention and co-operation across services.

There has been extensive stakeholder engagement and consultation to help to inform the development of the measures in the bill, and that engagement will continue as the bill progresses through Parliament. I hope that we can agree that the general principles of the bill are ones that will be welcomed across Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Ariane Burgess to speak on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

15:59

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): It is my pleasure to speak in this stage 1 debate on the Housing (Scotland) Bill on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, which was the lead committee in scrutinising the bill.

I first thank all those who shared with us their experience of, and expertise about, the housing sector and, in particular, all the members of the tenants and landlords panels that the committee brought together in order to learn from their experiences.

We know all too well that Scotland is in the midst of a housing emergency and we see the human cost of that across the country every day as increasing numbers of homeless people struggle to access housing. The timing of the bill is therefore critical and it presents an opportunity to help tackle some of the issues underpinning that emergency.

We know that the cost of private rental is far too high for many people; we heard the minister address that issue earlier. Rent control areas present an opportunity to redress that, and we must create a more equal balance of power between tenants and landlords. Rent control proved to be the most contentious issue during our scrutiny of the bill. The committee heard that without rent control prices will continue to spiral, but we also heard that rent controls might bring the risk of deterring investment in new properties and that landlords might leave the sector. On balance, a majority of committee members

supported the principle of having rent control measures, but the bill as introduced provides limited detail about how those will operate. We heard repeatedly during our scrutiny that that lack of clarity was having a harmful effect on the housing sector.

Shortly before the committee finalised its report on the bill on 31 October, the minister announced that the Government will lodge amendments at stage 2 to place a cap on rent increases, with the stated intention being to give the housing market more certainty about the implications of the bill. However, the fact that that decision from the Government came so late in the stage 1 process meant that the committee was unable to scrutinise the implications of that revised approach. As a result, we will carry out further evidence sessions early in the new year, and we will look specifically at the proposed amendments relating to the rent cap.

We have asked the minister to lodge amendments before those meetings, in order to inform our scrutiny. I was pleased that, in his response to our report, which we received yesterday, he confirmed his intention to do so. He also announced that there will be further Government consultation next year about when exemptions might apply to rent controls. The Scottish Government response appears to suggest that it is normal practice to have on-going consultation during the scrutiny of a bill, but we do not believe that that is conducive to good scrutiny. Failure to come to Parliament with fully developed legislation undermines the role of Parliament and creates uncertainty for all stakeholders.

I will look in more detail at the bill's rent control provisions, which require local authorities to gather data about the market in their areas in order to make a case to the Government for a rent control area to be established. The committee is concerned about the capacity of local authorities to gather the necessary data to inform decision making, given the existing financial challenges. *[Interruption.]* Local authorities have existing legal powers to create rent pressure zones, but not one has been established since the legislation created those powers in 2016, and the committee heard that lack of data is the key reason for that. There should therefore be a national approach to data collection and analysis, to be led and resourced by the Scottish Government. It is disappointing that the Government's response to the committee's report does not take that on board. There is a real risk that rent control areas will end up meeting the same fate as rent pressure zones.

I have focused so far on the issue of rent control because it is central to the purpose of the bill. However, the bill contains a number of provisions that aim to give further protection to tenants in

other areas, to which I will now turn. I highlight the fact that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee scrutinised the parts of the bill that relate to homelessness and to fuel poverty.

Part 2 of the bill deals with evictions and, importantly, gives the First-tier Tribunal the power to delay the eviction of a tenant in some cases in order to help reduce the negative impact of eviction. Witnesses told us that that already happens in practice and welcomed the fact that it will be put on a statutory footing.

Part 3 of the bill gives tenants the right to request to keep a pet and to personalise their home. Both are important rights that the committee supports and that were largely welcomed by our witnesses from all sectors, in recognition that private rented properties are, first and foremost, people's homes.

Time does not allow me to go into detail on the various other provisions elsewhere in the bill that the committee considered. Those include the powers for the Government to use unclaimed rental deposits, and changes to how joint tenancies can be ended, both of which the committee is broadly in agreement with.

I conclude by reiterating the committee's support for the general principles of the bill. It is my hope that the bill has a positive impact on the private rented sector. At a time of emergency in our housing system, I look forward to hearing my colleagues' contributions to the debate. The committee will continue its constructive work with the Scottish Government on this vital issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Thank you, Ms Burgess. I am sure that Christine Graham will want to offer you an apology for interrupting your speech. I call Collette Stevenson to speak on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

16:06

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Most of the committee's consideration of the Housing (Scotland) Bill was focused on part 5—homelessness prevention—and my comments today also focus on that part. However, we also looked at a small element of part 6, on fuel poverty, which we are supportive of.

In scrutinising part 5, we gathered views from a wide range of stakeholders, and I thank those who contributed their views. We pay particular thanks to those who attended and provided valuable testimony at the lived experience engagement session that was facilitated by Crisis. Many witnesses were positive about the expected

impact of the legislation. Scottish Women's Aid explained that if every sector considered

"the importance of having a home as the core of what they are working towards, that would go a long way towards making things better".—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 13 June 2024; c 38.]

Although we are supportive of part 5 overall, the committee believes that there are areas where more information is needed, such as how the ask and act duty will work in practice, the scope of provisions relating to domestic abuse and how the fulfilment of statutory duties will be monitored.

The duty on relevant bodies to ask about a person's housing situation and to act to prevent homelessness is fundamental, and although there was broad support for it, there was concern that the act element might end up being an additional route to local authority referral. In the minister's response to our report, he said that the Scottish Government is "committed to ensuring" that the duty works as intended, whether amendments are made at stage 2 or clarification is built into subordinate legislation or guidance. The importance of relevant bodies understanding what is expected of them cannot be overlooked, and we ask to be kept informed of developments.

The second element of the bill that I will focus on is the domestic abuse provisions. Again, the committee is supportive of those provisions, although we have called on the Scottish Government to ensure that, where domestic abuse might have contributed to rent arrears, provisions should apply to the private rented sector as well as to the social sector. The Scottish Government has said that it will review pre-action protocols that apply to the private rented sector and

"consider what changes would support landlords to recognise"

the effect of domestic abuse. With that in mind, the committee would like to know how that will work, how it will be done and when the work will be completed.

The bill rests on the extent to which relevant bodies fulfil statutory duties to prevent homelessness. In our report, we asked the Scottish Government for more information about how that would be monitored. We also asked how an individual could seek a review of a relevant body. In response, the minister said that

"it will be up to ... relevant bodies to satisfy themselves that they are meeting those duties."

The question of how an individual seeks a review of a relevant body's actions remains unclear, and we would welcome being advised of developments in that area.

Beyond those aspects, the committee wishes to be kept informed of developing guidance on the

flexibility of the six-month timeframe during which someone is considered to be threatened with homelessness. Members also want to know how conversations are progressing between the Scottish Government and the Department for Work and Pensions and the Home Office about potential co-operation to achieve the aims of the legislation.

Importantly, we also want the Scottish Government to ensure that the committee is aware of any changes to the financial memorandum, about which some witnesses had doubts.

Despite the committee's seeking more detail, we recognise that, if the bill is implemented and works as envisioned, not only could its measures help many people to avoid the trauma of homelessness but public services and the public purse could benefit, through early interventions. The committee is therefore in favour of parts 5 and 6 of the bill, and recommended that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee support them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I confirm that we have no time at all in hand, so members will have to stick to their speaking allocations.

With that, I call Meghan Gallacher, who has up to six minutes.

16:11

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I will try my best, Presiding Officer.

I begin my remarks on a point of consensus. Recently, my colleague Graham Simpson and I met the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and the minister to discuss the Housing (Scotland) Bill. I found the meeting useful and, although there were clear dividing lines over some areas of the bill, I believe that there are areas on which we can work constructively together, should the bill pass stage 1 today.

One such area is homelessness prevention. As we speak, more than 15,000 children in Scotland are homeless. That figure should shame each and every one of us. Last night, I received a huge volume of emails in my inbox about homelessness services, which are a priority for my constituents and for my party. There is scope for the bill to make vast improvements for anyone who finds themselves without a home or who finds themselves sleeping rough. Scotland is in the grip of a devastating housing emergency, which is destroying lives. My party will commit to working across the parties, where possible, to make much-needed changes to the bill, because we believe that everyone in Scotland deserves the right to a safe home.

However, the bill that is in front of us—the bill that we are being asked to scrutinise—is not a housing bill. What we have been presented with will not, in itself, tackle the housing emergency. The minister has the nerve to say that the bill will ensure that Scots can access an affordable rented home. He refuses to say that the Scottish National Party's botched rent control policy has driven up rents and priced thousands of Scots out of their homes. That is typical of the SNP—what it says and what it does never match up.

The last time that the SNP introduced rent controls, it was a disaster. More than 21,000 flats and houses disappeared from Scotland's private rental sector in a single year.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: I will indeed.

Paul McLennan: The member called the previous rent controls "a disaster". Those were about keeping people in their homes. If that was a disaster, I would welcome more of them.

It was not a disaster. It was about keeping people in their homes at a really difficult time. The rent controls that we are looking at now are about making sure that people have an affordable and safe place to stay. I am sorry, but I cannot accept that the previous form of rent controls was "a disaster".

Meghan Gallacher: There was a loss in investment. We need to tackle the housing emergency, and to tackle the housing emergency, we need to build more homes. We cannot afford for £3.2 billion of investment to disappear into thin air because of permanent rent controls that are being brought in by the SNP. That is not good policy.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Meghan Gallacher: No—I have been kind enough to give the minister one intervention.

Between September 2022 and March 2024, when rent controls were active, private rents increased by 16.5 per cent. That shows that rent controls do not work. It is a failed experiment.

The rent control proposal is causing concern not just in my party but among private home providers in the housing sector. Although some have welcomed the link to inflation for rent caps, that is insufficient on its own and could be a major barrier to investment. The housing industry has repeatedly warned that restrictions amount to price fixing and would limit rental income flexibility, distort the market and reduce the scope to improve and upgrade tired homes. The consequences of that will impact value, viability

and delivery and make Scotland an unattractive destination for the substantial capital that is needed to build new high-quality rental housing.

The bill will stifle the ambition to deliver more homes for Scotland. There is also a lack of clarity on build-to-rent exemptions. Investors are in limbo because they do not have certainty from the Government in order to push ahead with multimillion pound investment decisions. Although there have been commitments to holding further consultation processes and engagement sessions with stakeholders, the critical detail of the legislation might not be clear until at least the summer of 2025, which will prolong the uncertainty.

The SNP has not listened to stakeholders. Despite a year of consultations with the industry, including that of the housing investment task force, the SNP has dismissed numerous common-sense suggestions, such as removing rent controls between tenancies. Controls between tenancies will reduce overall rental stock from existing private housing providers, which continue to exit the sector, and that makes tenants more vulnerable in an increasingly constrained market. If the SNP was minded to change its position on that matter, that would provide greater predictability and certainty for investors while protecting tenants, which, in turn, would stimulate housing supply instead of suffocating it, which is what the bill does at present.

For the reasons that I have outlined, the Scottish Conservatives cannot vote for a bill that is a direct attack on the prosperity of our nation. At a time when the SNP should be encouraging economic growth, we have a bill that will harm the industry. A range of large-scale, credible and capable construction companies are folding, and when we lose them, we will lose critical skills that will not be replaced.

The bill was an opportunity to open the door to discussions in order to tackle the big problems in our housing sector, but the SNP has failed in its mission. It has failed to take the housing emergency seriously, and it is dismantling the housing sector brick by brick. My party will not sit back and allow the SNP to take a wrecking ball to an already fragile sector.

16:17

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The bill's policy memorandum says that

"The Bill is ambitious in responding to the need to improve ... housing outcomes".

The Government has said that the bill delivers the reforms to

"ensure people have a safe, secure, and affordable place to live"

and that its ambition is to "end homelessness in Scotland." However, 13 local authorities have declared a housing emergency, with more on the brink of doing so. Last year, there were 40,000 homelessness applications. Nearly half of people in Scotland live in areas where homelessness services are broken or at breaking point. Some 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation, nearly 250 people died on Scotland's streets last year, and almost one in three people in Scotland is in some form of housing need.

The bill does not need to be "ambitious"; it needs to be revolutionary, because stakeholder after stakeholder—Shelter, Crisis, the Scottish Property Federation, Homes for Scotland and even the Competition and Markets Authority—has been clear that the cause of the housing emergency is the shortage of affordable homes and that the demand for homes far outstrips the supply. That is what is creating spiralling rents, with an average increase of 10.7 per cent for a three-bedroom home last year. It is the lack of supply that has created the desperate need for temporary accommodation and pushed people who would benefit from being in social or mid-market homes into the private rented sector. We will deliver the revolution in our housing system only if we address that cause.

However, the bill attempts only to manage the symptoms of that chronic lack of supply. The lack of clarity about rent controls when the bill was introduced made things worse. There are landlords who are considering leaving the private rented sector, which would leave their tenants with nowhere to go.

I am relieved that some measure of stability has been reintroduced, but big issues remain, with the bill suppressing the ability of developers to invest in the affordable and social build-to-rent and mid-market rented homes that are so desperately needed. The Government's chaotic approach has led to—

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member give way on that point?

Mark Griffin: Briefly—I have only five minutes.

Meghan Gallacher: It is a simple question. Does Mark Griffin believe that rent controls should be linked to the tenancy or the property?

Mark Griffin: I look forward to lodging amendments to link rent controls to a tenancy, because there are huge issues around the investment in and upgrades to out-of-date housing stock that we need to see. There are net zero ambitions that we want to reach and I cannot for the life of me see how linking rent increases to the

tenancy will ever see that investment realised. I hope that that is something that we can address.

The bill is fairly substantive, but members have only five, six or seven minutes to speak about it, so we will not be able to get into the weeds of a lot of the details that we need to discuss today. However, as I said, if we are to support the bill at stage 3, significant amendments need to be lodged to ensure that the bill ends the housing emergency and does not just manage the system.

One thing that I find confusing is that this is a housing bill that does not build one single house. It appears to have confused the First Minister today, too. In response to Meghan Gallacher at First Minister's question time, he said that the Government is trying to take steps to improve the availability of rented accommodation and that that will be part of the housing bill that Parliament is considering this afternoon. However, there is clearly a disconnect in Government, because the bill does nothing to increase the supply of housing. I absolutely agree with the First Minister that it should—

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

Mark Griffin: I am sorry, Mr Mason, but I do not have time.

In contrast, my colleagues in the UK Government have instigated a step change in housing policy since the election in July.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Mark Griffin: I am sorry, minister, but I am in my last 30 seconds.

Labour has pledged to build 1.5 million homes in its first term in office, with an annual target of 300,000 homes a year. It is using all the levers of Government, from establishing processes to build new towns to amending planning policy to remove the blocks to building new homes.

Labour has taken that action over the past four months. The housing sector in Scotland is looking on enviously at the reforms that we are seeing across the UK, for which we have been waiting for the past 17 years.

The fundamental issue in Scotland is that we need more homes. The proposed legislation will not tackle that, and, unless we amend it to ensure that it treats the root causes of the housing emergency, we will not see the progress that we need to see.

16:22

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Presiding Officer,

"I am currently a single parent working as a nurse, and this rent amount is already half my nurse's earnings. I physically would be homeless if I was not being topped up by universal credit. I am already struggling to get by, made worse by the current cost of living crisis."

"It shouldn't be possible to be slowly priced out of your own home, a home that you have been living in for years."

Those are the words of tenants, many of whom, alongside Living Rent, gathered outside Parliament last night to demand rent controls that tackle ever-increasing rents. It is right that we hear their words today, as it is their tireless campaigning that meant that, earlier this year, Patrick Harvie was able to introduce the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which the Scottish Greens hope will be part of a new deal for tenants.

We are in the midst of a housing emergency—a crisis of soaring rents, insecure tenancies and a power imbalance that leaves thousands of Scots struggling to keep a roof over their heads. The Housing (Scotland) Bill offered hope to tenants—a recognition that bold, transformative action is needed to shift the scales of housing justice in Scotland, so I must express profound disappointment in the Government's decision to dilute the promise of rent controls. Limiting councils to capping rent increases at inflation plus 1 per cent is not transformation; it is capitulation to landlord interests that will perpetuate the very inequalities that the bill was meant to address.

Let us be absolutely clear: tying rent increases to inflation plus 1 per cent is not rent control—it is rent legitimisation. At a time when tenants are already struggling with the soaring costs of living, that measure enshrines perpetual rent increases into law. It is a green light for landlords to continue shifting their financial burdens on to tenants, many of whom are already at breaking point. It undermines the ability of local authorities to protect tenants from predatory rent hikes. Councils will not be able to bring rents down. The clear message from the Scottish Government is that its priority is not empowering local authorities or addressing tenant insecurity but appeasing landlords.

I will return to the issue of balancing tenants rights and investment in my closing remarks, but I will first mention the important homelessness prevention measures in the bill. As has been stated by Crisis, Shelter and so many other organisations that work day in, day out, supporting people who are at risk of homelessness or who are actually homeless, the best way to end homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

The measures in the bill come from years of work and discussion across a range of stakeholders. Importantly, they recognise that tackling homelessness is not just about housing

supply or affordability. That work must intersect with social security, health and social care services, support for community capacity building and so much more. Strengthening those aspects of the bill must remain a priority in on-going discussions as the bill progresses through subsequent stages.

Scotland deserves a housing system that works for everyone—not just for landlords and not just for developers, but for tenants, families and communities. We have a duty to the people of Scotland to ensure that the bill reflects the values that we aspire to: fairness, security and dignity in housing. I call on the Government to reconsider its approach to rent controls, to listen to the voices of tenants and to deliver the truly transformative housing legislation that Scotland so desperately needs.

16:26

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have great sympathy with the case studies that Maggie Chapman has highlighted, but the truth is that the most effective way to bring down rents is to increase supply to match demand—and there is growing demand, in our cities in particular. That is what is driving up rents, and the failure to increase supply has resulted in crisis.

I hope that the bill marks a turning point in the approach of the Government. For too long, the message was that private companies and landlords in the housing sector were the problem, rather than a partner. The cold, hard reality has now struck: the evidence is clear that investors are just walking away. The Chartered Institute of Housing tells us there is a growing body of evidence that private landlords are leaving the market. Some 72 per cent of local authorities responding to the CIH's PRS research stated that the sector was shrinking in their area, and 52 per cent were concerned about increasing homeless presentations from the private rented sector. That is a clear example of the Government's policy damaging the very people that it was aiming to protect. That is why we need to listen to the evidence provided by companies such as Rettie & Co, which said last year that £3.2 billion of potential investment was "at risk", and the regulatory uncertainty has reduced the appetite to invest in Scotland. All that is in the middle of a housing emergency, which is the last time that we need that kind of hesitancy.

People who are desperate for a home will not forgive us or thank us if we fail to create the right conditions to build more homes of good quality more quickly. There is no way that housing associations, councils and Government can tackle the housing emergency on their own. We need a

longer-term strategy, with partnership at the heart of it.

The minister hinted in a previous statement that he is looking to exclude mid-market rents and build to rent. I welcome that, as it is a step in the right direction. However, he needs to be clearer, and that needs to be specified in the bill. We cannot wait for yet another consultation. We need to have that in primary legislation, rather than in regulation, so that the investors that I was talking about know that there is longer-term certainty.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations reports that, if MMR were to fall under the PRS rent controls, that would make developing new homes unviable, due to the structure of funding and the need for lengthy business plans. It says that there has already been a significant slowdown in the development of MMR homes, with the starts of new homes in the category of "other affordable rent homes" at their lowest level for 10 years. I remind everyone that that is in the middle of a housing emergency.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: No, I have only four minutes.

The situation is replicated in the private sector, despite the fact that demand for MMR is consistently high, far outstripping supply. We need greater clarity on the scope and nature of the suggested exemptions for MMR and the build-to-rent sector.

We are sceptical about rent controls as a whole, but the Government's plan to limit rent increases to the consumer prices index plus 1 per cent might be sufficient to give investors the confidence that they need. It would stop large rent rises, while allowing for modest increases to ensure that repairs and upgrades are done. However, we want to look at controls in between tenancies and the impact that that might have on essential investments and upgrades that often take place when there is a change in tenancy. It is all about ensuring that we stand for tenants, improve the supply of available properties for tenancies, and ensure that there is good quality accommodation.

I support the other measures in the bill on homelessness and domestic abuse.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: At the heart of it, we need to ensure that we drive investment back into the sector so that we can deal with the housing emergency.

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

16:31

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): It is a privilege to be able to speak in support of the bill at stage 1. I am pleased that colleagues from the Greens and the Labour Party support the general principles of the bill, and I hope that that will continue at decision time.

The bill is needed. In the main, it is about offering protection against unfair rent rises in the private rented sector in Scotland. It also contains measures to tackle homelessness, and empowers tenants to enjoy some of the things that others have taken for granted for many years, such as being able to decorate your own home and keep a pet without needing permission from a landlord to do so. Imagine, we are in 2024 and a significant number of people in Scotland are not permitted to do those ordinary things—it is time that that changed.

Curiously, the prophets of doom who predicted that there would be a mass exit of private rented accommodation have been proved wrong again, with the latest figures showing that the total number of properties for rent in Scotland has gone up by about 10,000 since 2022. The bill cannot do everything, of course, and we will no doubt hear more from members about what it does not do than what it does do. In my view, it does the important things in that it offers protection from unfair and excessive rent rises in the private sector, when the cost of living, in many respects, is pushing more and more people into poverty and towards homelessness.

An article in the media today highlighted the plight of a person who faced an astonishing rent rise demand of 34 per cent from his landlord. He was unable to pay that and said that the whole experience was tantamount to an eviction. We have to try to help to prevent those situations, and I hope that the bill will do just that by limiting the rent rise that can be applied to the consumer prices index plus 1 per cent, to a maximum of 6 per cent.

The bill also strengthens a tenant's ability to keep and stay in their home, and places requirements on social landlords and public bodies to ask and act as a means of preventing homelessness. That extends to provisions for social housing tenants who are experiencing domestic abuse. There will be a requirement to intervene six months before homelessness appears to be imminent, rather than the current requirement at two months. Some stakeholders, including Crisis, have said that those duties to try to prevent homelessness, if approved by the Parliament, could make Scotland a world leader in that regard.

A wider range of issues were taken in evidence during the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's consideration of the bill. The housing emergency that has been declared by some authorities and the need to build more homes featured highly, and will no doubt be covered by members in the debate. It was really encouraging to hear from the City of Edinburgh Council that it had recovered about 500 houses that were long-term empty homes and had put them back into the letting pool. That type of initiative, in association with council buy-back schemes and refurbishments, which has been done by East Ayrshire Council in my region, will have a positive effect on reducing homelessness. I recognise that that is not the entire solution, but it is making a difference.

Times are tough, and costs are excessively high, but the Scottish Government has a good record in this area. Meeting the target of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032 is a challenge, but we have managed to keep on track to date, with nearly 23,000 homes having been completed so far.

The Housing (Scotland) Bill is an excellent step forward in providing some of those long-overdue protections for tenants in Scotland, along with some, equally long-overdue, modernisation of the relationship between tenants and private landlords. It means that a rented home in Scotland will be much more of a home than it ever has been before, and that surely has to be supported. I commend the bill to the Parliament.

16:35

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Just over a year ago, the Parliament passed a motion that declared that Scotland was in the grip of "a housing emergency." Of course, as with many things, the Scottish Government was far too late in admitting that it had presided over the creation of that crisis, and there has been no meaningful action over the past year to address the growing problem. In that time, vulnerable people have continued to struggle to find accommodation, as rents and house prices continue to rise at an alarming rate.

Finally, we have been presented with a bill that is thin gruel to a starving man, and the centrepiece of it is rent controls. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and every effort to introduce rent controls around the world has ended in the same way.

Over the past couple of years, the SNP-Green rent controls have led to £3.2 million of lost investment and an increase of 16.5 per cent in average rents. Those devastating effects have

been felt in my Lothian region in particular, where an already difficult rental market has been made even harder.

In the face of all that failure, what is the Scottish Government's plan? It is to double down and make those controls permanent. Words fail me.

Turning to the homelessness prevention part of the bill, I welcome the fact that the Government is seeking to address homelessness. However, yet again, the bill falls woefully short. We have to ask ourselves what measures in the bill will actually make a difference on the ground. The ask and act provisions are commendable, but it is unclear what difference they will make. We can give public bodies a legal duty to ask and act, but we have to make it clear what such action entails. From my reading of the bill, I have no idea what an individual working in a relevant body will be required to do when they encounter someone who is at risk of homelessness.

The SNP has a tendency to make big announcements and then fail to follow them up with any detail or positive action. I hope that we will learn from those mistakes, because, without proper follow-up, the bill will make no difference to the lives of homeless people in Scotland.

We need detail, but, unfortunately, the bill does not provide any. We need a clear plan on funding and implementation, neither of which is addressed in the bill. However, as always, I want to work constructively with the Scottish Government in its efforts to tackle homelessness, and I look forward to discussing stage 2 amendments with it. It remains a national shame that we have so many people without a safe place to call home. Solutions will require cross-party working and cross-portfolio policies that address the core causes.

I wish that I could get on board with a bill that seeks to address homelessness, but the rent controls will have a devastating impact on the housing market, the rental market and the economy in general. For that reason, I will not be voting for the general principles of the bill tonight.

16:39

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

It is difficult to see what the bill will do to provide housing for people in rural areas. The Scottish Human Rights Commission's report on economic, social and cultural rights in the Highlands and Islands paints a bleak picture, and it talks about homelessness and its impact on depopulation. It calls the rural and islands housing action plan a "positive development", but, sadly, we all know that the plan does more to benefit commuter towns than rural villages, due to the way in which the Scottish Government categorises areas that

are eligible for rural housing funding, and nothing in the bill changes that.

The report states that people are left roofless because of the lack of affordable housing in rural areas and the fact that private rents are out of local people's reach. If they are lucky enough to qualify for affordable housing, they find that none is available locally. If they are homeless and turn down a housing offer because it is too many miles away from where they need to be, they are no longer deemed to be homeless. That is the case even if they cannot access their job or their family from the house that they have been offered.

People often live in precarious substandard housing and depend on the good will of family and friends for the roof over their heads. The Scottish Human Rights Commission's report states that the lack of affordable housing is

"the single biggest issue contributing to depopulation",

with many people

"living in caravans ... camping pods and sofa surfing".

The bill does nothing to address that. Therefore, I ask the cabinet secretary to change the categorisation of rural areas in the bill to ensure that rural housing is never again built in urban areas.

Private rentals are really hard to come by in rural areas, and employers are now building homes for their own workforces. While they need to do that to attract workers, that brings us right back to tied housing, with people unable to change their job without facing losing their home. It also makes it more difficult for people to challenge their housing conditions if their employer is also their housing provider.

That is the crisis point that we have reached, but nothing in the bill addresses any of that. Sadly, we have also learned that Rural Housing Scotland is closing its doors due to lack of funding, and that is happening at a time when rural areas need more advocacy rather than less.

The bill sets out a requirement for all social landlords to develop and implement a domestic abuse policy, which is very welcome. Social landlords are well placed to spot signs of abuse such as control of finances. They are also able to assist abused people to remain at home while securing the property by fitting things such as panic alarms and other adaptations to keep them safe. We all know that those who flee domestic abuse in rural areas are often forced to move far away from home, which disrupts education for young people and support systems for the survivor. Much more has to be done to allow people who are subjected to domestic abuse to leave abusive relationships without the rest of their lives being turned upside down.

I hope that the bill will be significantly amended as it proceeds through its parliamentary stages, so that it can make a real difference to the lives of the people we serve.

16:43

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): There is so much in the bill that I would love to speak about today, including the right to keep a pet—which my cat, Blue, joined me on screen in committee to support—but I will focus my contribution on rent controls. It would have been easy, under pressure from landlords, to drop that policy, so I am glad that the Scottish Government has done the right thing and stuck to it.

Eighty-two per cent of Scots support a form of rent control. A minority of the other 18 per cent might be loud, litigious and likely to complain, but that does not make them right.

A couple of weeks ago, Future Economy Scotland briefed MSPs on the benefits of rent controls if they are done correctly. Some of the data that was shared was terrifying, even for someone who has experienced homelessness and talks housing on a weekly basis. We were told that private renters on the lowest incomes spend almost 50 per cent of their income on rent alone. We were reminded that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recently found that advanced economies without rent controls are in the minority—only 18 countries have no form of rent control, whereas 23 do. We heard that, despite continuing investment from the Scottish Government to mitigate UK policies such as the bedroom tax, 140,000 people, including 50,000 children, live in housing-induced poverty, which they would not be in if it were not for housing costs.

All that shows that rent controls can save the public purse. The Government is paying out to supplement rent payments for those who face unfair rises in the form of housing payments that go straight to private landlords. Instead, we should spend that money on supporting people out of poverty altogether.

As if any further evidence of need were required, this week, statistics were published that show that average rent in the Highlands and Islands has risen by 67 per cent since 2010, and I am well aware that that figure will be hiding low increases in some places where even the council struggles to fill its homes, as well as extreme increases in places such as Inverness.

I have already met the Minister for Housing to discuss potential changes at stage 2 to strengthen the bill. In particular, I hope that he will consider amendments that seek to rebalance the power

dynamic between private landlords and their tenants. The penalties for breaking the rules on rent increases or evictions must be more than a risk worth taking for a landlord who wants to make as much money as possible. The system must also be fair to landlords who care and stick to the rules; they cannot look around and see others benefiting from poor behaviour.

The facts on rent levels cannot remain up for debate. Frequently, those on both sides of the argument say that we do not have the evidence, data or knowledge required to justify action or inaction. That is within our control. We can require information to be provided rather than ask local authorities to ask landlords to have a think about sending it in. It is not a tall order to want to know what somebody is charging for something as fundamental as a home.

Ariane Burgess made the important point that the need for a rent control area, when evidenced, should result in a rent control area. We cannot repeat what happened with rent pressure zones, which even keen councils did not manage to introduce. As someone who sat in a council in which two thirds of the attendees declared interests in relation to such controls but stayed to vote against them anyway, I know that there must be a willingness to step in when the need for intervention is clear, as we should always prioritise the need to protect tenants.

I will conclude by repeating that it is encouraging that the Scottish Government is continuing with worthwhile protections for tenants and measures to prevent homelessness. Those are valuable causes, and I look forward to working with the Minister for Housing to ensure that our shared aims are achieved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I note that Mr Rennie, who participated in the debate, is not in his seat. I will expect an explanation and, indeed, an apology.

16:47

Maggie Chapman: I offer my sincere thanks to all those involved in the stage 1 scrutiny of the bill, including committee members, clerks, witnesses, and even those with whom I profoundly disagree. I also put on record my thanks for the on-going work with regard to the parliamentary process, including all the briefings that we have received for today's debate and all the conversations about how to make the different provisions in the bill as robust as possible.

I am grateful to the other members who have highlighted the bill's important provisions on eviction protections, on domestic abuse, and on decorating and keeping pets, which would give tenants the ability to make a house truly a home.

Lots of people have a keen interest in the bill. Of course, not all want it to progress. Despite widespread support for rent controls across Scotland, and the recognition that our housing system is not delivering safe, warm and affordable homes for too many Scots, detractors will continue to argue that the bill will destroy investment and that it has not got right the balance between developers, landlords and tenants. Indeed, the Scottish Government has said that its rent control calculation strikes a balance between the interests of stakeholders in the private rented sector.

However, let us not mince our words: this is not balance—it is surrender. The housing system is already tilted in favour of landlords, many of whom have profited handsomely while tenants shoulder the burden of stagnant wages, rising inflation and skyrocketing living costs. The Government's retreat reveals a profound failure to understand the nature of the crisis. Tenants are not asking for balance—they are demanding fairness. They are demanding the right to live in homes that they can afford without the constant threat of being priced out.

The original promise of the bill was to empower communities, protect tenants, and redefine housing as a human right. The Government's rent control proposals undermine all three. They reduce councils to administrators of modest rent increases instead of champions of housing justice. They perpetuate a system in which landlords hold all the power. They abandon the idea that housing is more than a commodity. We believe that housing is a fundamental necessity for every person in Scotland.

We must also confront the broader context. Critics of rent controls often blame monetary policy and rising interest rates, and point to the challenges that landlords face in high-inflation economies. Let us be clear that those economic pressures are not the fault of tenants, yet tenants are the ones who are being asked to pay the price. Emergency legislation that was introduced to protect tenants during this crisis was a lifeline, not a luxury, and the bill must build on that, not erode it.

Despite that disappointment, I remain hopeful about what might be achieved through the bill, if we are willing to fight for it. The bill still holds the potential to be a transformative force in addressing the housing emergency. It can be a tool to give tenants real security, to empower councils to act boldly in the interests of their communities and to establish housing as a cornerstone of a fairer, greener Scotland. We must insist on rent controls that truly control rents, not just manage their ascent. We must insist on tenant protections that reflect the reality of tenants' struggles, not the preferences of landlords. We must insist that the

bill lives up to its promise to be a vehicle for the new deal for tenants.

16:51

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to close this crucial debate for Scottish Labour. I thank my colleagues across the chamber for their thoughtful contributions. I also thank the organisations that provided briefings ahead of the debate, including Crisis, the SFHA, Shelter Scotland and Aberlour.

Since 2023, the Scottish Government and 13 local authorities have declared a housing emergency. That emergency has real-life implications for people across the country and, for some, it is a matter of life and death. Homeless death statistics that were released this week highlight the real consequence of the SNP's failure to get a grip on the housing emergency, as we have heard from members today. Across Scotland, tragically, there were 242 homeless deaths last year. For my constituents, the figure is even more staggering as it represents a rate of twice the Scottish average: 56 people died while homeless in Glasgow last year.

In 2023-24, 14,150 households were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in which the lead applicant was a woman. I was pleased to hear the minister and others, including Collette Stevenson and Emma Roddick, recognise the issues that are faced by women who are experiencing domestic violence.

Figures from the National Union of Students show that 12 per cent of students in housing in Scotland have experienced homelessness while studying. My colleague Rhoda Grant set out the impact of the housing crisis, including difficulties in the private rental market in rural areas. In addition, 30,000 children in Scotland are driven into poverty by high housing costs—an issue that others have spoken about today. That is the impact of the housing crisis in Scotland.

Housing costs are significant, especially in the private rented sector—as others, including Ariane Burgess, have highlighted—and that can be an expensive option. Rents in Glasgow have increased by 81 per cent since 2010.

Scottish Labour wants to ensure that the Housing (Scotland) Bill addresses those issues. However, we are concerned that, as drafted, the bill would need significant amendment to do that properly. Putting on local authorities the burden of collecting data in order to evidence the effects of rent controls without providing support and resources to do that could render rent controls unworkable. The Government also needs to consider carefully the position of housing associations, such as Yorkhill Housing

Association, which I visited recently to see the great work that it does to provide affordable, accessible homes in Glasgow.

The Government must also make sure that there are no unintended consequences, such as for mid-market rent homes, which members including Willie Rennie have highlighted, that could hinder the work that it does.

Leaving much detail to regulation leaves a lot of unknowns, as Meghan Gallacher and others noted. One result of that is that students are not yet clear about what the Government will do to address their concerns on purpose-built student accommodation.

Fundamental to addressing the crisis that we are in is a revolution, as my colleague Mark Griffin highlighted, in the supply of much-needed homes across Scotland. The bill, as it stands, does not provide that. It treats the symptoms of the housing emergency instead of addressing the root cause.

For many people across the country, including everyone on a housing list, children in temporary accommodation and disabled people living in inaccessible properties, there is a real need to simply build more homes. Given that the bill will not build a single home, it will not consider calls to ensure that accessibility for disabled people is built into the housing system.

Emma Roddick: The member will not get an argument from me on the need to build homes, but does she recognise that doubling the rate of house building over the next five years alone would not be enough to undo the past year of rent increases?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The scale of the work ahead is, of course, huge, which is why I am disappointed at the pace at which the Government has moved on the matter. The bill does not address issues with the current system, including the impact of incompetent maintenance from landowners or of that by factors on home owners, which is an issue that my constituents in Glasgow have raised. The bill will not build new houses, so it will not meet calls to ensure that accessibility for disabled people is built into the housing system.

Scottish Labour is supportive of the principles behind the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which we will vote for today. However, we are clear that it needs significant improvements, and we will seek to make those amendments as the bill makes its passage through the Parliament.

Ultimately, we want everyone to live in a decent home that they can afford. The only way to ensure that is to drive up the supply of warm, safe and affordable houses across all tenures in Scotland.

16:56

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am delighted to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. As the Parliament has already heard, Scotland is truly facing a housing crisis, and the bill is badly needed. The legislation that the Government has introduced risks making the crisis in the sector even worse. For that reason, we will not support it at stage 1.

The problems with the bill should have been seen from a long way off. When the introduction of rent controls was first proposed in 2021, members on the Conservative benches were quick to warn about the problems to which it could lead. We highlighted the international example of Sweden, which has decade-long waiting lists for rent-controlled properties and a second-hand market of sub-let properties. The SNP created its own case study here, when rent control measures led to higher rent increases than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

However, regardless of those lessons and despite the end of the Bute house agreement, the SNP has ploughed on with its rent control policy. Unfortunately, the Government's handling of the whole process has ensured that we are all in a worse situation. Once again, the Scottish Government is continuing its pattern of dealing with important policy decisions through secondary legislation. Last month, the Government finally released some detail about its proposals in a statement but, overall, that statement damaged confidence about housing in Scotland.

Today, members—even the convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee—talked about the lack of scrutiny through the process and the difficulties around and disappointment in the way in which the Scottish Government has handled it.

Meghan Gallacher spoke about the number of homeless individuals and the shame that we should feel. The housing emergency needs to be tackled. Rent controls will not improve the situation; they will make things worse. The bill will stifle investment and harm the industry and we should not introduce any legislation that does so. Even Mark Griffin spoke about the amendments that will be required at stage 2. The way in which housing is managed in Scotland needs to be dealt with.

Willie Rennie spoke about—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry, Mr Stewart. I ask those members who are coming into the chamber to refrain from having private conversations that are now getting above a tolerable noise level. Please continue, Mr Stewart. I will give you the time back.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you. Willie Rennie spoke about the increased demand and the failure to build. He mentioned that 72 per cent of local authorities said that the supply was shrinking and that Government policy was once again damaging the sector.

Jeremy Balfour spoke about homelessness and the whole crisis that has been created and mentioned that rent controls will continue to fail. The bill is so woefully short of detail and has made such difficulties that it will continue to cause problems. It might have been introduced with the right intentions, but it completely fails to deliver on the need to tackle Scotland's housing emergency.

What we needed was a bold piece of legislation that would put the supply of new properties front and centre of the Government's agenda. Instead, we have been left with framework legislation that aims to deliver damage to the sector.

As the bill proceeds through the next stages, I hope that the Scottish Government is finally able to learn from the mistakes of the past and listen to the stakeholders who are telling it that there are problems with the bill and to ditch this damaging plan, which will make Scotland's housing crisis even worse. We should not be considering a bill that will make the crisis worse for communities the length and breadth of Scotland. When individuals and organisations are telling us that this is the wrong way to go, we should listen.

17:00

Paul McLennan: The bill has been welcomed by many organisations in the housing sector, which all want it to progress. We have all had the briefings telling us that that is what they want to happen.

Everyone should have a secure and affordable home, but that is not the reality for some people, and that should be the driving force behind the bill. The bill is an opportunity to deliver change that will bring us closer to that aim. If agreed to, the measures will have tangible benefits for the people of Scotland for years to come.

As I stated in my opening remarks, we know that a good-quality, affordable and well-regulated housing system can help to tackle poverty. "Tackle poverty" are not words that I have heard much in the debate this afternoon, but we want to tackle poverty, including for families with children, as well as to promote equality and support wellbeing.

Meghan Gallacher: Will Paul McLennan give way?

Paul McLennan: I have only five minutes.

Eradicating child poverty remains the Government's priority, and we can all agree that

having a secure and affordable home can make a contribution to achieving that.

The package of rented sector reforms in the bill have the potential to make rents more affordable for private tenants and to make a positive difference for people who rely on the rented sector for a home. Rent control presents an opportunity for us to ensure that there is a regular consideration of rent levels by allowing us to act where that is needed, based on local circumstances.

Patrick Harvie: The minister has once again claimed that the package of rent controls will make rents more affordable. Will he acknowledge that tying rents to an above-inflation increase everywhere, even when the evidence justifies a rent-controlled area, means that rents will continue to become less affordable?

Paul McLennan: The main priorities for me are that we have rents that are affordable for people in rented accommodation and that we are able to attract investment, which is incredibly important and which has been raised in the chamber this afternoon.

In the rented sector, expanding rights to request a pet or personalise a private rented property will help tenants to make a property feel like a home. When a tenant feels able to make a home, they are more likely to stay longer and to take better care of the rented property.

We have heard about the changes in respect of unlawful eviction. That will help tenants to take action to hold to account landlords who do not abide by legal requirements.

I want to touch on points that were raised by the committee members and others. On Ariane Burgess's point about rent controls, I note that the forthcoming consultation is about the balance of rent controls and attracting investment. I look forward to meeting and engaging with the committee on that point.

The ask and act duty was raised by Collette Stevenson on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Guidance on that will be developed as the bill itself is developed.

I want to touch on the point that Willie Rennie—

Jeremy Balfour: Will Paul McLennan take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I only have five minutes.

Willie Rennie raised an incredibly important point about mid-market rent. The Government has stated its commitment to invest £100 million in mid-market rent. The consultation will look at that. Like Willie Rennie, I want to drive investment into the sector, into MMR and into the build-to-rent sector.

Meghan Gallacher said that the statement on rent controls was welcomed by the Scottish Property Federation, the Association for Rental Living and DJ Alexander. We set up the housing investment task force, which continues to discuss with us what the bill will look like.

I turn to homelessness prevention. We have an important opportunity to improve the lives of thousands of individuals and families across Scotland through preventing homelessness and the long-term harms that are associated with it as early as possible. It will require culture change and a range of different bodies to work differently, but the rewards could be significant and groundbreaking.

We will work closely with stakeholders across different bodies and sectors, as we have done over a number of years, and with people with lived experience of homelessness to ensure that the legislation, guidance and training on the new duties are fit for purpose. The homelessness prevention duties are an essential part of our vision to end homelessness in the longer term, but they are also essential to reducing pressures on the housing system and tackling child poverty now.

The Government is taking urgent action on the housing emergency as we speak.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Minister, if I might ask you to stop for a second. I am aware of various conversations that are going on across the chamber. I ask all members who are in the chamber to take their seat and listen to the minister.

Paul McLennan: Thank you, Presiding Officer. This Government has already taken urgent action on the housing emergency. We are investing an additional £22 million in our affordable housing supply through charitable bonds. That follows our investment of £80 million in an acquisitions fund that targets the five authorities that are under most pressure.

I mentioned the £100 million that was announced in the programme for government, which will deliver 2,800 mid-market rent homes. We are also working with key partners, including COSLA and the housing to 2040 board, to ensure that we are focused on tackling the housing emergency.

We continue to tackle empty homes as a priority. We have invested £3.7 million in the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which has helped to return almost 11,000 homes to active use since 2010. On top of that, we have next week's budget.

The bill is about giving tenants a safe, secure place to live and ensuring that we have a well-

managed private rented sector that works in the interests of tenants and landlords and that brings in investment. It is also about tackling poverty. I hope that members will support the bill and bring forward those possibilities.

Housing (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-15211, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Housing (Scotland) Bill. I invite Paul McLennan to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Housing (Scotland) Bill, agrees to—

(a) any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act, and

(b) any charge or payment in relation to which Rule 9.12.4 of the Parliament's Standing Orders applies arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Paul McLennan*]

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

Scottish Land Commission (Appointment of Commissioners)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-15637, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the appointment of commissioners of the Scottish Land Commission. I invite Mairi Gougeon to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament notes the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's consideration and recommendation of three appointments to the Scottish Land Commission at its meeting on 12 November 2024; welcomes the Committee's recommendation that the Parliament approves the appointment of Dr Lucy Beattie and Dr Calum MacLeod as Land Commissioners to the Scottish Land Commission and the appointment of Robert Black as Tenant Farming Commissioner to the Scottish Land Commission, and approves the appointments as required by section 10 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.—[*Mairi Gougeon*]

17:06

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am so sorry to keep members late on a Thursday, but I am afraid to say that the Scottish Conservatives have some very deep concerns about these appointments. I have two key points to make, but before I do so, I want to make it very clear that we do not question the working experience or qualifications of the candidates.

The committee report shows that the current Scottish Land Commission chair, Michael Russell, initially recused himself from the short-listing process for the Scottish land commissioner roles, given that he knew one of the candidates. However, the cabinet secretary subsequently decided that Mr Russell should be involved. Given that Mr Russell knew one of the candidates very well, that casts doubt on the whole process. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Eagle.

Tim Eagle: Scottish National Party members are getting excited, because they know that I am right, but that is fine.

Secondly, information that is fully available in the public domain shows that one of the candidates listed was an SNP candidate in the recent general election. Another of the candidates has written extensively on a personal blog about land reform, expressing a very particular point of view, written on a pro-independence blog and produced a report for the Jimmy Reid Foundation, arguing that the land reform legislation—

The Presiding Officer: It would be very helpful if we could hear Mr Eagle. Let us be courteous to one another.

Tim Eagle: —does not go far enough.

That matters, Presiding Officer, because it follows—you would not believe this—the appointment of long-term SNP MSP, Government minister and former SNP party president Michael Russell as chair of the commission. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Tim Eagle: Even the former Scottish Green MSP Andy Wightman said that that was very odd. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Tim Eagle: SNP members are getting excited, because they know that I am right. How can the cabinet secretary expect us—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Eagle, I am going to have to ask you to stop for a moment. As is always the case when a member has been called to speak, I would very much like to hear the member. I know that each and every member would like to be listened to when they have been called to speak.

Tim Eagle: Thank you again, Presiding Officer.

In all seriousness, how can the cabinet secretary expect us to take the Scottish Land Commission seriously if there are doubts about the impartiality of the recruitment process and, more important, when some of the people involved clearly hold a political view?

The risk is that these appointments look like nothing more than nepotism. The process does not give confidence that it has been truly independent, and it makes the Scottish Land Commission seem more like a mouthpiece for the SNP's policy direction than an organisation that is working in the best interests of the communities that it serves. All of that gives rise to the question whether, other than retaining in another agency the Scottish tenant farming commissioner, which does some good work, we should be honest and not keep the SLC at all.

17:09

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I must begin by saying that Tim Eagle's final comment was absolutely appalling. The Scottish Land Commission does incredibly important and powerful work and advises us on vitally important matters, so to make that suggestion and to politically grandstand on this issue is absolutely shocking.

I was going to begin by saying that I am grateful to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee members for their engagement throughout the process and their careful consideration of the

appointments. I very much welcome the committee's recommendation to Parliament that Robert Black be approved as the next tenant farming commissioner and that Lucy Beattie and Calum MacLeod be approved as land commissioners. The committee was satisfied that the appointment process appeared to be adequately robust and that the nominees appeared to be suitably qualified. It has been a robust and independent process.

I can confirm that the ministerial appointment process has been fully adhered to, as have the statutory requirements relating to the appointment of commissioners to the Scottish Land Commission. Appointments to the commission are regulated by the Ethical Standards Commissioner, and this appointments process has been conducted in line with the code of practice for ministerial appointments to public bodies in Scotland. The parliamentary process that was to be followed on this occasion was agreed with the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, following an exchange of letters with me.

I want to focus on the independent nature of the appointment process. I appointed a selection panel to carry out the process on my behalf, and it consisted of the deputy director for land reform, rural and islands policy at the Scottish Government; the chair of the Scottish Land Commission, Michael Russell; an independent panel member, Dr Patricia Armstrong; and an adviser from the office of the Ethical Standards Commissioner. Following my appointment of the selection panel, I delegated the creation of the appointment plan, the assessment and the undertaking of the fit and proper person test to the panel, which was entirely in keeping with the usual process for public appointments.

The code of practice requires that the selection panel should recommend only the most able candidates to the appointing minister. I did not have visibility of the candidates ahead of receiving the selection panel's recommendations. I received a summary from the panel once the assessment was complete, as happens in all other ministerial appointment processes.

This is where I must address some of the falsehoods outlined by Tim Eagle in his unfortunately shocking statement. The panel sought advice from the Ethical Standards Commissioner because one candidate had stated that they knew of Michael Russell through attendance at a party-political event and because the same candidate had previously stood as a candidate at an election. Given that connection, the Ethical Standards Commissioner recommended that Mr Russell "consider" recusing himself from the panel. The advice from the commissioner's office made it clear that the

recommendation was entirely based on the perception that might arise from Mr Russell's involvement, given the heightened interest in the appointment round, but it said that it had absolutely no doubt that Mr Russell would intend to fulfil his duties as a panel member fairly and competently.

Having considered that advice, I was content for Mr Russell to remain on the panel, given that he and the candidate had no personal or professional relationship. They had never knowingly met, and Mr Russell's involvement in the recruitment was critical, due to his role as chair of the Scottish Land Commission and the number of roles that were being filled.

The open and transparent declaration and management—by the selection panel and by applicants—of potential conflicts was in line with the code.

I am sure that we can all agree that it is important to get these appointments right, and I believe that we have. We have undertaken a competitive recruitment process that was conducted in line with the code of practice for ministerial appointments to public bodies in Scotland and was regulated by the Ethical Standards Commissioner.

Following that, I am pleased to be able to recommend to Parliament two excellent candidates for the Scottish Land Commission and an additional excellent candidate for the role of tenant farming commissioner. I am confident that they will join the Scottish Land Commission and contribute their talents, knowledge and expertise, as do all other commissioners, and that they will make their contribution to work of the commission with integrity, passion, impartiality, transparency and enthusiasm.

With that, I recommend that Parliament approves the appointments.

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

Decision Time

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-15605, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the Housing (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:14

Meeting suspended.

17:17

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-15605, in the name of Paul McLennan. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not vote. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Martin. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15605, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the Housing (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, is: For 83, Against 31, Abstentions 4.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15211, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution to the Housing (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Housing (Scotland) Bill, agrees to—

(a) any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act, and

(b) any charge or payment in relation to which Rule 9.12.4 of the Parliament's Standing Orders applies arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-15637, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on appointments of commissioners of the Scottish Land Commission, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15637, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on appointments of commissioners of the Scottish Land Commission, is: For 87, Against 31, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's consideration and recommendation of three appointments to the Scottish Land Commission at its meeting on 12 November 2024; welcomes the Committee's recommendation that the Parliament approves the appointment of Dr Lucy Beattie and Dr Calum MacLeod as Land Commissioners to the Scottish Land Commission and the appointment of Robert Black as Tenant Farming Commissioner to the Scottish Land Commission, and

approves the appointments as required by section 10 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Point of Order

17:21

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It will be brief, and I am sorry to keep everybody back. Earlier, I forgot to refer to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a farmer, and I own a small bit of land. My apologies, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Eagle. That is not a point of order, but it is on the record.

Meeting closed at 17:21.

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Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

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Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

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