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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 11 December 2024

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic.

Sheriffhall Roundabout (Funding)

1. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what resources are being allocated from the city and regional growth deals to fund the A720 Sheriffhall roundabout. (S6O-04089)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Scottish Government's £300 million commitment to the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal includes up to £120 million specifically for the grade separation of the A720 Sheriffhall roundabout.

Miles Briggs: The proposed upgrade of the roundabout was included for delivery as part of the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, which was signed back in 2018. As the Deputy First Minister said, £120 million of funding was allocated to that. We are now halfway through the 15-year period of the deal, but we have still not seen any movement towards delivery of the project. Given the delays in progressing it, what are the estimated delivery costs of the upgrade now? Does the cabinet secretary believe that permission for that much-needed piece of infrastructure for my Lothian region will be granted before the end of the current parliamentary session?

Kate Forbes: The Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal has delivered quite a number of its commitments over the past six years. On that specific project, as with all trunk road projects, a public local inquiry is the appropriate forum for consideration of outstanding objections. I am sure that the member will appreciate that it is only right that the Scottish Government takes the time to consider all objections that are received.

The financial risk for any cost over and above the £120 million commitment to deliver the Sheriffhall roundabout project sits with Scottish ministers. As and when that materialises, the Scottish Government will make Parliament aware in the normal manner.

“Developing Scotland’s Economy: Increasing The Role Of Inclusive And Democratic Business Models”

2. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when it will provide a full written response to the report, “Developing Scotland’s Economy: Increasing The Role Of Inclusive And Democratic Business Models”. (S6O-04090)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government will respond to the report this month. I am grateful to the independent review group who produced the report. The review was an action that was included in the national strategy for economic transformation.

A key part of creating fair work opportunities is the encouragement of new businesses, and businesses and enterprises that are guided by commercial success and societal impact have a huge role to play. The report will influence how community wealth building is taken forward in Scotland. We will introduce legislation to Parliament to advance community wealth building in the current parliamentary year.

Lorna Slater: Co-operatives, social enterprises and other democratic business models are effective tools for economic transformation and wellbeing and they give people a genuine stake in the economy. Does the minister agree that we should aim for significant growth in that sector as a priority? Will the Scottish Government accept in full the 17 recommendations in the report, and particularly the recommendation on creating an economic democracy group?

Tom Arthur: The Government will set out its position when we publish the response and I do not want to pre-empt that. However, as I stated when I attended the event on publication of the report, the Government is very much aligned with the ethos and intent behind it.

I entirely agree with the member on the absolute importance of inclusive and democratic business models. We need to grow not just the total number of businesses that use the model, but their share of our economy, because they play an incredibly important role in tackling inequality for individuals and regions. I look forward to engaging with the member and others once the Government’s response to the report has been published.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Many social enterprises in Scotland have warned that they have nowhere left to cut as a result of the United Kingdom Government's national insurance hike, which has jeopardised the operation of inclusive and democratic business models and organisations across the third sector. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of those changes on IDMBs? Do you agree that the Chancellor of the Exchequer must not balance the budget on the back of the third sector?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to always speak through the chair.

Bill Kidd: I beg your pardon, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Tom Arthur: The Scottish Government is deeply concerned about the additional pressure that the UK Government's changes to national insurance will exert on social enterprises and other third sector organisations. Social Enterprise UK warns that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's decision will particularly impact on social enterprises that create jobs, often for those who are furthest from the labour market, and deliver vital public services.

I am happy to confirm to the member that I will ensure that consideration of the recommendations in the independent review group's report will factor in the impact of those changes. I will continue to call on the chancellor to fully fund the impact of the employers national insurance hikes on Scottish organisations.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Worker co-operative and employee-owned businesses have been shown to be more productive and resilient than those that operate under traditional business models. However, the report on inclusive and democratic business models finds that they are poorly integrated into Scotland's wider economic strategy. Does the minister agree that co-operatives and employee-owned businesses should be treated as key to our economy? Will he consider directing national bodies to take further action to support their growth, as recommended in the report?

Tom Arthur: On the Government's response to specific recommendations in the report, as I said in earlier answers, we will set out our position when we publish our response to the report imminently.

On the central thrust of the member's question about recognising the importance of those models, I agree with him 100 per cent. Co-operatives, social enterprises, employee-owned businesses and a range of other inclusive and democratic business models have a central role to play in driving forward inclusive economic growth. They

are not the soft, fluffy side of economic development. We want to see them mainstreamed as a key part of driving forward a more prosperous Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Economic Productivity

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will boost productivity in the Scottish economy. (S6O-04092)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Since 2007, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 11 per cent, compared with 6 per cent in the United Kingdom, and productivity has grown at an average rate more than double that of the UK.

The budget delivers major investments in high-value net zero opportunities, housing, transport, digital connectivity and critical infrastructure, which contribute to a stronger economy. The additional £15 million enterprise package supports women-led businesses, cluster growth activity and highly innovative high-growth businesses. City and regional growth deals stimulate growth across the country, and investment in skills, research, employability and town centre regeneration recognises the importance of a growing and talented active labour market, all of which contributes to boosting productivity.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that detailed response. Partnerships between higher education institutions and industry advance research, upskill the workforce and help to develop technologies that are critical for the provision of well-paid employment while increasing competitiveness and productivity in key sectors of the Scottish economy. The University of Strathclyde's world-leading centre for continuous manufacturing and advanced crystallisation is a first-class example of that.

How can the Scottish Government support such collaborations to ensure that Scotland remains a leader in innovation and productivity, particularly in sectors that are vital to economic growth?

Kate Forbes: The member is right that partnership and collaboration are critical across the economy to drive growth and productivity. As is set out in our national innovation strategy, which was published just last year, we want to support the development of business clusters in priority areas—such as energy transition, health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and data and digital—where we already have a competitive advantage and the educational, industrial and natural assets that are necessary to be truly world

class. That advantage is frequently recognised by external stakeholders who identify those areas as presenting the biggest opportunity for Scotland to become more productive and drive economic prosperity.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary is aware of the high level of economic inactivity among young people. Will she spell out to the Parliament what the Government sees as the top priorities to address that?

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right. I have been engaging on that issue with a number of stakeholders and I would love to engage on it with colleagues across the Parliament.

While we are exploring the issue, I caution that economic inactivity among young people is often to do with them engaging in further or higher education, and we need to recognise the value of that for them in later life. However, we are taking forward a number of initiatives. First, we are maintaining support for employability schemes, and particularly the no one left behind scheme, which tries to get those who are furthest from the labour market closer to it. Secondly, once people are in jobs, we need to support employers to make sure that they retain them. All sorts of barriers can cause people to drop out of the labour market, not least transport links and childcare. The third area is about upskilling people who are in the workforce and are staying in it. That is where our skills offer, which is collaboratively delivered with employers, really matters.

Those are just three different stages, but it is a national challenge that requires us all to put our minds together and ensure that we have a solution. At a time when our borders do not allow freedom of movement, the biggest source of labour, as it were, is people who are in the United Kingdom and who are not currently working.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Productivity is vital, but the cabinet secretary must recognise that we need to take a broader set of measures and time slices. Although she correctly quotes the figures for GDP per head since 2007, she must know that, on the same measure since 2016, Scotland has grown more slowly than the rest of the United Kingdom, at 2.6 per cent versus 4.4 per cent for the UK. Also, on a regional basis, only eight regions in Scotland have exceeded the national mean whereas, in the north-west of England, growth in GDP per head has doubled since 2007. She might not want to acknowledge my particular data points, but does she accept that she needs to use a broader set of measures than the ones that she set out in her original answer?

Kate Forbes: I do, actually, because getting underneath the surface of those figures requires us to understand what is really going on. The fact

that we highlight labour productivity alongside GDP growth is important, because it measures the amount of economic output in terms of gross value added that is produced on average by each unit of labour input. That is an important indicator of economic performance, and it is an area where, UK-wide, we have lagged behind comparable countries.

There are a number of solutions. One is to try to stimulate greater levels of private and public investment. Secondly, it is about innovation and ensuring that we invest in technology. The third solution is about skills and ensuring that people are in the right jobs for their skill sets and that they have opportunities to upskill. I recognise that there are a number of challenges, and we take them very seriously.

Autumn Budget 2024 (Impact on Small Businesses)

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the United Kingdom Government regarding the potential impact of the UK Government's autumn budget on small businesses in Scotland, including environmental horticulture businesses. (S6O-04093)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I engage regularly with the UK Government and have done so on its autumn budget and the impact of that on Scotland. I have also been engaging directly with businesses, business representative organisations and sector bodies on the impact of the budget on them, and those discussions informed the decision making for the Scottish budget. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government has written three times to the UK Government—on the impact of national insurance increases, on funding arrangements for agriculture and on the impact of changes to inheritance tax agricultural property relief.

Audrey Nicoll: Independent garden centres and nurseries make a significant contribution to the Scottish economy, but they also make a significant contribution to our wellbeing and recovery, Scotland's biodiversity strategy and climate change mitigation. As progressive employers, many embrace the living wage increase. However, the increase in national insurance contributions and changes to business property relief will have a huge impact on the sector's future viability, which is compounded by challenging cross-border plant trade rules, a challenging year of weather and weak consumer confidence.

Given the Prime Minister's request that the public judge him on five things—one being economic growth, which now seems rather dubious—what action is the Scottish Government taking to support small businesses that operate in the environmental horticulture sector?

Kate Forbes: Our support for small businesses has been consistent across budgets, particularly through the more generous small business bonus scheme, and that is alongside our decision in the current budget to freeze the basic property rate and to maintain the small business bonus scheme to ensure that we reduce overheads. I appreciate that those businesses face huge challenges, some of which have been identified by Audrey Nicoll. Our overall package of reliefs is supplemented by additional efforts to tackle retail crime, which will affect some garden centres in particular, as well as our support for increased footfall through a specific fund of £2 million, on which we are working with VisitScotland, to encourage visitors to visit lesser-known destinations around the country.

Skilled Manufacturing Businesses

6. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports skilled manufacturing businesses to expand and thrive. (S6O-04094)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): In recent years, we have invested significantly to support Scottish manufacturing, including through our £75 million investment in the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland. It works with companies of all sizes to unlock productivity gains, develop new products and processes and transform workforce skills through its manufacturing skills academy. Our programme for government confirmed our goal to support promising deep-tech businesses with prototypes and manufacturing.

Bob Doris: MJM Frames, based in Maryhill, manufactures bespoke, high-quality hardwood frames for domestic and commercial furnishings, as well as sofas for temporary furnished properties. MJM employs nine people and it has ambitious plans to relocate locally to secure a long-term future for its workforce, support expansion, increase competitiveness and potentially double its workforce. How does the Scottish Government support businesses such as MJM Frames in my constituency, and will the minister accept my invitation to visit MJM Frames in the new year?

Richard Lochhead: I am pleased to hear about MJM Frames and its ambitious plans to relocate locally and increase its workforce significantly. In the light of Bob Doris's invitation, I would be more than happy to consider a visit to the company, if he wants to follow up in writing with further detail.

In the meantime, we will continue to work with the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland to support small manufacturers to expand and upscale their workforce. I would also draw the company's attention to the Built Environment-Smarter Transformation innovation centre—BEST—which sounds very relevant for a company that is involved in the construction of hardwood frames.

As the Deputy First Minister outlined a few moments ago, there are also a number of support measures in the draft budget.

Independent Businesses (Rural and Small Communities)

7. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to independent businesses in rural and small communities. (S6O-04095)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I am very committed to building a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive rural economy that meets the goals of this generation and future generations. Our enterprise agencies, particularly Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise, help businesses to start and scale, be more productive, access finance, attract investment, develop new products and services, enter new markets and positively impact on their communities. We have allocated more than £313 million to the enterprise agencies in 2025-26 to support their work.

Colin Beattie: Office for National Statistics data has revealed that retail insolvencies in Scotland have increased at a faster rate than in other parts of the United Kingdom. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the retail sector to identify the support that it needs?

Kate Forbes: The retail industry leadership group drives and supports the delivery of the actions that are set out in the retail strategy, particularly on improving fair work across the sector, and it provides an on-going forum for constructive engagement with retailers. It is co-chaired by Tom Arthur, who is the Minister for Employment and Investment, and Polly Jones of Asda, and it comprises senior business representatives and industry groups. It provides a regular opportunity to discuss the investments that are being made by the sector and any concerns that the Government can help the sector to tackle.

Public Information and Public Messaging (Hindi Provision)

8. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what public information

and public messaging campaigns that it has commissioned or funded are currently available in Hindi. (S6O-04096)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The current Scottish Government marketing information available in Hindi includes the national health service dentistry campaign, the Road Safety Scotland drive on the left campaign and the renters' rights campaign. There is no set translation list that is used by the Government. The list is informed by policy and stakeholder input, along with the Public Health Scotland languages and accessible formats guidance.

In addition to Scottish Government marketing activity, health information is available on NHS Inform and can be found by searching "Hindi" on the NHS Inform website.

Sandesh Gulhane: The 2022 census disclosed that Indians are the second largest immigrant group in Scotland. Hindi, the official language of India, is the third most widely spoken language in the world, with the number of Hindi speakers in Scotland equalling approximately the population of Perth. However, I have noticed that across NHS health boards and other public bodies, public information and messaging is available in a range of languages but not in Hindi.

I have raised the issue before in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and recently with Food Standards Scotland, which was campaigning on vitamin D, including to reach that population, yet the information was in other languages but not in Hindi. Will the Deputy First Minister commit to ensuring that, where information and messaging are available in alternative languages, Hindi is always one of them?

Kate Forbes: I will certainly give that some thought. As Sandesh Gulhane said, Hindi speakers make an enormous contribution to Scotland, and it is very important that they feel that all Government material is accessible to them in their own language.

I am sympathetic to the member's point about ensuring that we have a multilingual approach to Government information and marketing. I would be happy to look at that further and perhaps take that one step further by looking carefully at any specific translation issues that Sandesh Gulhane wants to raise over the coming weeks and months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. There will be a short pause before we move to the next portfolio, to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they wish to do so.

Finance and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 1 has not been lodged.

Housing Association Aids and Adaptations Targets

2. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how much it will allocate in its budget to housing associations, including to support them to meet their aids and adaptations targets. (S6O-04098)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): In my Scottish budget statement last Wednesday, I confirmed that the registered social landlords adaptations programme budget for 2025-26 is £20.9 million. That significant increase from the £8.245 million budget for 2024-25 reflects our commitment to support social landlords to deliver necessary adaptations; will help to tackle delayed discharge, as tenants will return home quicker from hospital; and will ensure that disabled people can live independently at home for as long as possible.

The budget bill is still subject to the parliamentary process and is likely to conclude by the end of February 2025.

Finlay Carson: Having previously raised questions about the significant cut in the budget for aids and adaptations, I welcome the fact that the Government has increased the budget to just under £21 million. However, that is still way short of what housing associations want. Can clear advice be given on whether money can be used to fund supported modular living accommodation that can be lifted and dropped into position and moved again? Current guidance appears to be a grey area. Recent significant improvements in technology, such as modular, movable and bespoke accommodation, could go a long way towards ensuring that the bed-blocking crisis that the national health service faces in Scottish hospitals is addressed and could lead to improved outcomes for many patients.

Shona Robison: I welcome Finlay Carson's welcome for the increase in the budget. The figure was arrived at after discussion with registered social landlords, and we keep these discussions open.

I or one of my colleagues will write to Finlay Carson on the ask in relation to supported modular accommodation, because that is quite specific. I will certainly look at the matter.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The increase in funding for adaptations is really welcome. Can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government's response to the housing emergency in some parts of Scotland is

addressing not just the number of affordable homes that are provided but the quality and accessibility of those homes so that everybody in Scotland can have a warm, safe place to live that meets their needs?

Shona Robison: Increasing affordable housing supply is important because it is about delivering the right homes in the right places and ensuring that those homes are of a high quality and accessible. New build homes that are delivered through the affordable housing supply programme must, as a minimum, meet the housing for varying needs standards. Where possible, new build homes must also meet a number of additional quality standards, including in relation to having space for home working and study and private or communal outdoor space and being digitally enabled. We want everyone in Scotland to have a warm, safe place to call home.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Is the cabinet secretary able to say when housing associations will receive notification of the amount of their individual allocations? Housing associations received that figure for this year's budget only fairly recently, which meant that some tenders for work were no longer valid. Therefore, the timing of that information is crucial.

Shona Robison: I appreciate the point that Mark Griffin makes. We want to ensure that registered social landlords receive the information as quickly as possible. I will make sure that that is relayed.

Planning Hub

3. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress towards creating a planning hub. (S6O-04099)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The housing planning hub that I outlined in my statement to the chamber in November is currently being established. We are working with stakeholders to identify, initially, stalled housing sites and the reasons for the delays. That will allow us to prioritise actions for the hub to co-ordinate, including brokerage support and providing access to expertise. A short-life working group has been established to drive that forward.

In addition, the hydrogen planning hub, which I launched in September of this year, is being led by the national planning improvement champion. It is now actively supporting planning authorities on technical and other issues to do with planning relating to hydrogen. I met the national planning improvement champion this morning to discuss the issue.

Meghan Gallacher: This morning, the minister and I received a copy of a letter from a house

builder who eloquently described the current state of our planning system and the decisions taken by the Government that have made it incredibly challenging for small and medium-sized house builders.

The last time that the Scottish Government undertook a review of the planning system, it resulted in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and national planning framework 4. Since both of those have been in place, there has been a decline in house-building delivery, a loss of house builders, a decline in the number of construction companies and the declaration of a housing emergency. Scotland is now a hostile environment for anyone in the housing industry.

What role will the planning hub have in looking at those particular issues, which are really important to our housing sector? How much will the Government invest overall in the hub to prevent such issues from recurring and the hub itself from becoming a talking shop?

Ivan McKee: I am absolutely determined, as is the Government, to make the planning system as responsive and effective as possible to enable Scotland to be the most attractive part of the United Kingdom for investment in housing and energy infrastructure. We are taking that work forward at pace, and the actions that I outlined in my statement to the chamber last month will ensure that that happens.

The member should recognise that NPF4 and the passing, by the Parliament, of the 2019 act were important steps forward in providing a planned system, which is hugely important in ensuring that all the competing asks of the planning system are properly balanced.

The hub is a response to asks from the sector, which we are keen to respond to at pace, so we are working very closely with the sector to accelerate the establishment of the hub. As I indicated in my previous answer, the initial work on the hub involves identifying stalled sites and the generic systemic issues that are causing sites to be stalled and then taking forward solutions.

We recognise that more than 160,000 housing units in Scotland already have planning permission but are not being built by the industry. We want there to be consistent planning annually, with more housing units being approved than are currently being built by the industry. There is a combination of factors; the problem is not all down to planning. Planning will play its part, but an awful lot of housing units already have planning permission but have not been built.

Budget 2025-26 (Public Services Support)

4. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how its 2025-26 budget will support public services. (S6O-04100)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish budget sets out the Government's proposals for renewing our public services and delivering hope for Scotland's future. That includes protecting and improving our national health service, allowing councils to deliver the services that people rely on, ensuring that staff in early learning and childcare are paid at least the real living wage from April, and continuing policies that have led to levels of crime falling by 40 per cent since we came to office. As I said last week, if we want that support for our public services, the Parliament has to vote for the budget.

Evelyn Tweed: Stirling is a large constituency with urban and rural communities, which often have different challenges. How will the investment in public services benefit the wide and varied needs of the communities across my constituency?

Shona Robison: The allocation to Stirling Council will be made in due course as councils get notification of their allocations. However, I believe that the allocation, including a real-terms increase in the general revenue grant—that is discretionary spend—will help the many differing communities in urban and rural settings in Evelyn Tweed's constituency, which she narrated. The budget will help to ensure the resilience of our public services for such a variety of communities.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is telling that SNP back benchers think that the question even needs to be asked, but it is little wonder, with Scotland's NHS in crisis. Hospitals have already declared critical incidents, and there is real fear about what might happen when winter deepens. However, nothing in the budget takes our public services in a new and better direction. In their reactions to the budget, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute are clear that the Government has failed to seize the opportunity for reform.

What does the cabinet secretary have to say to the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, who said that the budget

"fails to tackle the big, transformative challenges Scotland faces and dodged the critical decisions we needed to see"?

Shona Robison: What I would say to the STUC and others is that this is a budget that invests in our public services. It is record investment in our NHS and in local government. It provides resources that will help to ensure that our investment in public sector workers can be

sustained, which will mean that we have a larger and better paid public sector. I am sure that the STUC would welcome that.

The question for Michael Marra and his colleagues is whether they will vote for or against that investment in public services. It is a very simple question.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The imminent additional costs to Scotland's critical public services from UK Labour's brutal hike to employer national insurance contributions will have an acute impact of £191 million on our Scottish NHS, £5 million on our Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and £25 million on Police Scotland, which is the equivalent of more than 800 new police salaries. Does the Government agree that resource-abundant Scotland cannot continue to thrive by merely mitigating damaging UK policy and that we must chart our own path through to independence?

Shona Robison: Of course, we on these benches believe absolutely that the best constitutional future for our country is independence. I agree with Ash Regan's point about employer national insurance contributions. The cost for the core public sector in Scotland is estimated to be around £550 million, and that would leave a £250 million shortfall because the UK Labour Government does not recognise the larger size of our public sector and the fact that we have invested in public sector pay. That is before we take into account the other services that are an integral part of our public sector, such as general practitioner services, social care-commissioned services and third sector organisations that provide vital support to our public services.

This matter has a long way to go. We will ensure that we press the Treasury to give a fair settlement for Scotland's employer national insurance contributions.

Local Government Services (Satisfaction Levels)

5. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to address the reported decrease in levels of satisfaction with local government services. (S6O-04101)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Despite the ongoing fiscal challenges, I was pleased to set out a strong and fair settlement for local government in the Parliament last week. The 2025-26 local government finance settlement provides record funding of more than £15 billion, which is an increase of just over £1 billion compared with the 2024-25 settlement.

Local authorities are essential partners in the design and delivery of public services. There is more for all of us to do to get across to people the great job that councils and Government do in meeting the needs and interests of people and communities. I think that the budget will help to do that.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but she cannot escape the fact that public satisfaction with public services in Scotland has fallen from 65 per cent in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2022.

The impact of the underfunding of council services year on year is clear. The First Minister's own local council, Scottish National Party-led Perth and Kinross Council, has already provisionally agreed a double-digit council tax rise in April. Councils such as SNP-run Falkirk Council in my region are contemplating big tax hikes and big rises in charges to plug a long-standing financial hole.

Meanwhile, across the country, libraries close, educational provision is diminished and social care services are run down. After 17 years in office, is this what a budget for progress looks like under the SNP?

Shona Robison: The first thing to say is that not putting £1 billion of additional money into local government will not help with any of those things. That £1 billion of extra money will go into local government only if the budget is passed.

My second point is that I do not recall any of the discussions with Labour having involved demands being made for more than £1 billion of extra money for local government. If that is Labour's central ask, I am willing to hear that, but I do not recall that ever having been mentioned.

We will continue to put resources into local government, which I believe will help to ensure that council tax rises are kept to a minimum. That includes the provision of £289 million of discretionary funding through the general revenue grant. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has welcomed that funding in the budget, which has not always been the case in other years.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is welcome that the 2025-26 budget provides local government in Scotland with a £1 billion uplift and record funding. Will the cabinet secretary further outline how that additional investment will address key local priorities and deliver the public services that people need and deserve?

Shona Robison: To reiterate what I said earlier, the budget provides record funding of more than £15 billion, which is an increase of just over £1 billion compared with the 2024-25 settlement.

Importantly, it includes £289 million of discretionary funding through the general revenue grant. It also removes £500 million of ring-fenced money into the baseline and includes additional capital funding, including £40 million of ScotWind money, all of which has been welcomed by COSLA. If the organisation that represents local government can welcome the budget for local government in the Scottish budget, perhaps members across the chamber can do likewise.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is no wonder that levels of satisfaction have decreased when budgets have continually been squeezed by the SNP, with councils having to do more with less year on year. How can the cabinet secretary allege that local government is getting a fair deal when councils the length and breadth of Scotland are having to decimate services, close facilities and raise taxes?

Shona Robison: I gently point out to Alexander Stewart that we are about to have a Tory-led debate in which the Tories will call for £1 billion of tax cuts. The Tories cannot call for £1 billion of tax cuts and come to the chamber to demand more money for local government. The £1 billion of tax cuts would take away the £1 billion increase for local government. The Tories cannot have both, so they must decide whether they want their £1 billion of tax cuts or whether they want £1 billion for local government. The Tories really need to get their lines straight here.

Inverclyde Council (Funding)

6. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the total funding allocation is for Inverclyde Council for 2025-26. (S6O-04102)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The local government finance settlement will provide record funding of £15 billion in 2025-26, which is a real-terms increase of 4.7 per cent. Provisional local authority allocations will be published in the local government finance consultation circular on 12 December. That is when Inverclyde Council will know what the total funding allocation is for the coming year.

Stuart McMillan: Year after year, we have heard Labour councillors in Inverclyde calling for more money to be given to Inverclyde Council without highlighting which budget the additional resources should come from as it is "not their job" to make that suggestion. It was interesting to read that the new member of Parliament for Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West now agrees with the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Government as he provided the exact same rebuttal to the Tories in one of his recent columns.

Will the finance secretary comment on discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding the funding allocated to the Scottish Government for 2025-26 and on whether, at this stage, the Scottish Parliament has been given clear indication of every penny of funding that Scotland is to receive?

Shona Robison: We are on record as having welcomed the reset—that is essentially how the Chancellor of the Exchequer described it—of the United Kingdom Government’s budget for 2024-25, because there have been years of budgets not keeping pace with inflation. The reset was very welcome.

The 1 per cent increase in 2025-26 is also welcome, but I make the point to Stuart McMillan and others that we need sustained investment. The spending review, which is coming next year for both resource and capital, will be absolutely fundamental, because a one-year budget does not fix 14 years of Tory austerity.

It remains to be seen whether there will be a trajectory of continued investment in public services. We will continue to raise that and press the UK Government on it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Paul O’Kane joins the meeting online.

Medium-term Financial Strategy

7. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to publish the next medium-term financial strategy. (S6O-04103)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The publication of the 2024 medium-term financial strategy was delayed, first, by the Parliament needing to appoint a new First Minister, and then by the United Kingdom pre-election period.

I am actively considering the timeframe for fiscal events and publications in 2025, and I will update the Finance and Public Administration Committee early in the new year. I intend to return to the usual schedule for the medium-term financial strategy as I recognise the important role that it will play in pre-budget scrutiny for the 2026-27 Scottish budget.

Paul O’Kane: The Fraser of Allander Institute has stated that it was “near-impossible” for it to calculate the funding position ahead of the 2025-26 budget due to

“the lack of a medium-term financial strategy”.

I have heard what the cabinet secretary has said by way of excuse for that medium-term financial strategy not coming to the chamber, but the failure to produce it in 2024 was deeply disappointing. It

is important that we do not get excuses for failure to produce it next year—indeed, the Auditor General has called for the strategy to be published at the earliest opportunity. Does the cabinet secretary accept the comments of the Fraser of Allander Institute that failure to publish the strategy has hindered transparency of the public finances, and can she be any more specific on the date in 2025 on which she will publish it?

Shona Robison: We published some medium-term financial information, but the budgets were substantially reset when the new UK Government came into office. The point is that when the UK Government changes and spending positions change significantly, it is challenging to then base a medium-term financial outlook on old information from an old Government.

The multiyear spending review next year will be critical in relation to the outlook for resource and capital. I want to get us back into a regular routine of a medium-term financial outlook, but we must recognise that the major changes in the spending outlook and the political changes that we have seen impact on the financial information that we can put out. I will update the Finance and Public Administration Committee in the new year on the schedule for that publication.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot call question 8, because the member was not present at the beginning of questions on this portfolio, as is expected—indeed, she came in more than 13 minutes after they had started. I therefore thank the cabinet secretary

That concludes portfolio questions on finance and local government. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Budget 2025-26

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15792, in the name of Craig Hoy, on delivering a commonsense budget for Scotland. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

14:45

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Last week's budget continues on a path that has been well trodden by the Scottish National Party—more tax, more excuses, poorer public services and an abundance of smoke and mirrors to mask the absence of economic growth.

The SNP has form: it repeatedly seeks to evade responsibility for its actions. Our motion sets out the choices that the SNP could make—decisions that would be in Scotland's national interests, not in the SNP's interests.

However, as always, SNP ministers never learn. They focus on inputs, not on outcomes. The Scottish Government's high-tax agenda repeatedly fails to deliver value for money for ordinary Scots. It fails to deliver better public services, and it fails to deliver public service reform.

Despite Scotland's record-high taxes, the tax take continues to be weak. The SNP has imposed £1.7 billion more in income tax, but the net tax position is expected to be only £800 million. The Scottish Fiscal Commission says that that is an "economic performance gap" under the SNP.

In contrast, we set out plans to improve our economic performance through fully costed tax cuts for ordinary Scots, including for bus drivers, nurses and teachers. The average Scottish worker would be £222 a year better off. Nearly 2.7 million people would get a real cut in their income tax bill. Compare that with the SNP's cynical move to freeze the lower tax threshold last week, which saves most taxpayers just £1 a month. It is a pound-shop budget from a pound-shop Government.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Mr Hoy is, along with me, on the Finance and Public Administration Committee. When the Scottish Fiscal Commission was in front of us yesterday, I specifically brought up the terminology "economic performance gap". If Mr Hoy had been listening in that evidence session, he would have heard the Scottish Fiscal Commission making it clear that that gap is nothing to do with the actions of the Scottish Government. That is on the public record, so I invite you to reread that. Is that further

evidence of the Conservatives' Hetty Wainthropp style new front bench?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Craig Hoy: We are getting the cheap insults in early. What I heard yesterday was the Scottish Fiscal Commission issuing to the Scottish Government a series of warnings on tax and spending.

Our plans do not only set out tax cuts for workers. We also set out tax cuts for home buyers, many of whom Scottish estate agency Galbraith Group say are "shocked" when the Scottish National Party's property tax bill lands on their doorsteps. Our fully costed move would save Scottish house buyers an average of £800, and would take 70 per cent of transactions out of the tax regime altogether.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will make some progress, then give way shortly.

That policy would mean more money for young families who are getting their homes together and less for the SNP to waste on pet projects and fringe obsessions.

We did not just set out plans that would cut taxes for workers: our plans would also cut tax for many pensioner households, too—households that are forgotten by Labour and which were cynically dropped from the SNP's budget this year. As winter approaches, I agree with the SNP that it was Labour that originally scrapped the winter fuel payment, but despite its attempt to grab headlines, the SNP then scrapped it, too, and has not restored it. Many pensioners this winter will get nothing at all, and will get only £100 next year.

As the mercury dips, what is different about the temperatures this winter compared with those next winter? Is it that the SNP calculated that by next year, the election campaign will be well under way? Does the SNP really think that it is okay for pensioners to freeze at home this winter, but that somehow they do not need to do so in an election year? Yes—we should be looking to save £2 million from free bus travel for asylum seekers this year if, at the same time, the SNP is taking the winter fuel payment off our pensioners.

We need to look to business to drive growth in Scotland, so that is why we do not just propose cutting taxes for average Scots—we also want to undo the damage that the SNP has done to many Scottish businesses. Across Scotland, retail, hospitality and leisure businesses are struggling because footfall is down, costs are up and the SNP is clobbering them with more red tape.

Now, Scottish Labour has dealt business another blow—a national insurance tax on jobs in sectors in which the wages bill is often by far the biggest cost. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out, that national insurance tax will also fall on workers through lower wage growth.

That is why we want to mitigate the cost of Labour and the SNP with a tax cut for many businesses next year, by passing on the 40 per cent rates relief to shops and leisure businesses. We also want a game-changing, uncapped 100 per cent all-in relief for our pubs and restaurants. That would benefit nearly 3,500 pubs and 3,300 restaurants in Scotland. Instead, the Scottish Government's budget offers relief only to small businesses with a rateable value of £51,000 and less, and only at the 40 per cent rate. Surely what the industry deserves now is a shot in the arm, so I hope that ministers might think again about extending relief during the coming budget negotiations.

Let us turn to some of the key areas in the budget. The SNP is right to press the United Kingdom Government for an uplift to cover the costs of the national insurance contributions increase. Whether the UK Government will do that is still unclear, but it is clear that the Scottish Government pays civil servants higher wages than they are paid elsewhere in the UK, and that there are more of them per capita. The national insurance increase bites harder into the public finances as a result of the SNP's policy decisions on the shape and size of its civil service.

Ivan McKee: Does Mr Hoy recognise that there are significantly more teachers, doctors, nurses, midwives and police officers per head of population in Scotland than there are across the rest of the UK? Does he also recognise that they are paid more—in fact, several thousand pounds more—in their take-home pay after tax than they would be paid down south?

Craig Hoy: The minister needs to learn a lesson. Yesterday, we found out that there are fewer teachers and doctors, but I know that, under the SNP, there are more spin doctors.

In its budget response, the Scottish Fiscal Commission points to a clear set of public pay risks in this year's budget. We welcome the fact that, unlike last year, the Scottish Government has published a public sector pay policy, but the Government is proposing a 9 per cent package over three years, which is two points higher than the inflation estimate. That is, in itself, a risk, given that the Government says that its revenue budget position remains very tight.

However, although the budget makes provision for pay awards, it makes no provision for pay progress—in other words, for people who are

moving up pay scales. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, that leaves a 1.5 per cent black hole in the SNP's pay plans. The question for the cabinet secretary, when she speaks, is how she intends to pay for it, because the Government plans make no reference to reducing the head count. The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing that was given to the Finance and Public Administration Committee makes it clear that the budget constraint is compounded by staff costs. In other words, public sector pay is simply not sustainable under this SNP Administration.

We give a cautious welcome to the £30 million for a programme of public sector reform, but we do not necessarily need to spend money in order to save money. We will look closely at the plans when the Minister for Public Finance brings them forward next year.

In reality, how committed is the SNP Government to delivering meaningful public sector reform? Will it now remove quangos that duplicate work? Will it reduce core civil service head count, which has risen significantly since Covid? Will it wage a war on waste? If so, that £30 million will be well spent.

Let us look at what SNP waste looks like in this budget alone. There is £60 million for the woke equalities and human rights portfolio. There is £50 million for Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd this year, even though the ferries were meant to be completed two years ago.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: No. I do not have time.

In the budget, there is up to £50 million for a national care service that even SNP councils no longer support, and there is £8 million for baby boxes that many new parents do not want, need or use.

There is £5.5 million for fake foreign embassies and £12.8 million for a foreign aid budget, although foreign aid is a reserved matter. There is £5.5 million for external affairs policy and advice and £2 million for a Scottish Land Commission that is crammed full of SNP cronies.

Presiding Officer, unpicking the budget reveals that, under the SNP, the benefits bill is now unsustainable, with the Scottish Fiscal Commission warning that it will reach £9 billion within five years. Even before the Scottish Government removes the two-child benefit cap, nearly £1.5 billion more is being spent on benefits than the Scottish Government is receiving in the block grant.

In evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee yesterday, the Scottish Fiscal Commission revealed that the adult

disability benefits bill is to surge by hundreds of millions of pounds because of the “soft touch” system that underpins it. Professor David Ulph said that sick Scots are staying on benefits longer than people in the rest of the UK, with the DWP removing claimants on review in England at a rate of 18 per cent, compared with just 2 per cent coming off disability benefit in Scotland. That poses what Professor Ulph described as a significant risk in terms of the sustainability of benefits in Scotland.

As the SNP benefits bill soars, the budget continues to be cut in core areas. The enterprise budget is down £33 million; £110 million has been taken from rail services in cash terms; there have been reductions in cash terms to drug and alcohol services; and there has been a council settlement that fails to make up for last year’s council tax freeze and a decade of cuts, which will force many councils to increase council tax next year.

It is clear that the Government has more money than ever before, but what the Government is going to do with it is less clear, as the Fraser of Allander Institute has recognised.

We welcome the increased funding for health, but more money alone will not solve the crisis in our national health service. It needs leadership and it needs a delivery plan. That is something that is evident from today’s headlines. *The Herald* has “Number of NHS GPs in Scotland drops again”. The Daily Mail says that accident and emergency delays are evidence of NHS collapse, and *The Scotsman* headline says, “Bed blocking high nine years since SNP pledged to end it”.

Therefore, whether this budget cuts funding or increases it, we know that, under the SNP, our public services are only getting worse.

The budget is bad for business, it is bad for taxpayers and it is bad for Scotland. That is why the SNP urgently needs to change course to back our pro-growth tax cuts, to reform public services and to restore sustainability to Scotland’s public finances.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the draft Scottish Budget 2025-26 will not deliver good value for taxpayers; notes its continuation of the Scottish National Party administration’s high-tax agenda, which has damaged economic growth in Scotland; condemns funding for free bus travel for asylum seekers, which could have instead been used to provide 6,600 pensioners in Scotland with a full Winter Heating Payment, and calls on the Scottish Government to cut income tax to 19% for those earning up to £43,662, introduce full business rates relief for pubs and restaurants across Scotland for 2025-26, and raise the threshold at which house buyers pay residential Land and Buildings Transaction Tax to £250,000.

14:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I welcome any opportunity to talk about the draft budget, but there is one particular aspect of the Conservative motion that I think it is incumbent on us all to condemn. I know that there are members on the Conservative benches who deeply value all the communities that they represent and will deplore the terms of the Tory motion. Knowing those individuals, I do not believe for one moment that they condone the Farage-esque dog-whistle attack on asylum seekers that is at the rotten core of the Tory motion or Craig Hoy’s description of our important equality work as “woke”. It is, frankly, embarrassing. I suspect that it is more likely that they agree with the joint call from the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Catholic church today that, as a Parliament, we must

“resist attempts to divide our society, and instead show support to people who have come to Scotland seeking sanctuary and new beginnings.”

I could not agree more.

I welcomed the discussions with all parties represented in this Parliament, and with organisations beyond it, as we prepared the draft budget. Along with Ivan McKee, I look forward to those discussions continuing as we approach the next stage of the budget process. The budget that we presented last week is a product of that engagement and is focused on delivering progress and hope. Our approach to economic growth, the social contract and progressive taxation is fundamental to achieving that.

Scotland’s economy is one of—

Craig Hoy: Will the minister give way?

Shona Robison: In a moment.

Scotland’s economy is one of the best performing of any part of the UK. One of the most important factors in realising that has been the attracting of foreign direct investment. In fact, a record number—[*Interruption.*] I know that the Tories do not like to hear good news about the Scottish economy, but I am going to tell them it anyway. A record number of foreign direct investment projects were secured in Scotland in 2023, maintaining Scotland’s position as the top-performing area of the UK outside London for the ninth year running, and the Scottish Fiscal Commission has forecast that Scotland will have higher earnings growth and lower unemployment than the rest of the UK in 2025-26. I hope that Craig Hoy can welcome that.

Craig Hoy: For the record, can the cabinet secretary state how much she is receiving from the UK Government to extend rates relief to the

Scottish retail, leisure and hospitality sectors and how much of that she is spending in the budget?

Shona Robison: The consequentials are about £145 million. We have to be very careful in what we allocate this year, because there will be no consequentials next year from the UK Government for rates relief because of the changes to business tax. Craig Hoy and the Tories want us to bake unaffordable and unsustainable tax cuts into the budget, which would mean that there would be cuts to public expenditure. These are the choices that have to be made. We are delivering support to 13,000 hospitality premises by providing affordable support to the sector.

The Tories want to put at risk the positive change that we are delivering for the people of Scotland by doing away with our international network of offices, for example. In 2023-24, Scottish Development International's international network costs were about £11 million. In return, more than £2 billion was delivered in exports. Far from being common sense, it makes no sense to get rid of our network of international offices. That is the sort of sound investment for Scotland that we will deliver, instead of engaging with the Tories' Trussonomics.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The cabinet secretary mentions the relief in the hospitality sector that has been felt as a result of the rates relief that was announced in the draft budget. Does she recognise that there is still pain in our retail sector, which is struggling to recover from the worst of the pandemic and is experiencing the decimation of our town centres? Does she recognise that that sector is equally deserving of some kind of support?

Shona Robison: We think that the position that we have put forward is balanced and affordable and focuses on hospitality. We will continue to have discussions on that, but any money that we put into the budget for rates relief will have to be baked in. No money will be allocated by the UK Government for rates relief next year, because it is changing its business taxation system. The UK Government's scheme will be entirely self-funding from higher-rate properties, and we cannot replicate that in Scotland, because we do not have the same number of higher-value properties as the UK has. Whatever we do this year will be baked in—we need to bear that in mind.

The environment is also not exempt from the Tories' ire. The budget will deliver £4.9 billion of positive climate spending, from spending on public transport through to nature investment. The Tories say that they want to merge various environmental agencies, but they have failed to spell out which ones they would merge and why that would be beneficial. They have said that the budget should not pass, but they ignore the economic opportunity

that investing in offshore wind will bring to Scotland.

Although Christmas is just around the corner, the letter that we received recently from Russell Findlay would have made Scrooge blush. In that letter and in the motion for debate, there is a call for tax cuts that the Tories' estimates suggest would slash public investment by £1 billion—take note, Alexander Stewart. Russell Findlay has said that the cuts that he proposes in his letter are “fully costed”, yet the Tories have never produced a breakdown of the costs that would allow them to be scrutinised. Perhaps Craig Hoy will publish that today.

The Tories talk of cuts to social security but refuse to say what benefits they would cut. Perhaps I can clear up the scale of the cuts that the Tories are calling for: £1 billion is more than the total cost of adult disability living allowance and the Scottish child payment—their combined cost is about £877 million. If the Tories are claiming that they would not cut those benefits, what welfare support do they want to cut? It is time for them to come clean with the detail.

Not content with that, they appear to have a new front in Russell Findlay's bargain-basement attempt at starting a culture war. This time it is babies. Clearly, Russell Findlay thinks that babies are a left-wing cabal who are living on handouts and have had it too good for too long. Now, he wants to scrap the baby box. It appears that all the work to try to stop being the nasty party might have been in vain.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary needs to work a bit harder on her pre-scripted gags, given the response from the chamber.

On the issue of welfare spending, surely we should not be happy about presiding over exponentially expanding welfare spending, year after year, when we should be getting people off welfare and into work. That is what this Government should be doing.

Shona Robison: And that is why we are investing in employability. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second. I say to members that I have allowed a little bit of leeway in terms of reaction to what is being said, but we need to hear the person who has the floor—in this instance, the cabinet secretary, who has taken a number of interventions.

Shona Robison: It is strange that the Tories talk about unsustainability only when it comes to welfare funding and do not talk about unsustainable tax cuts that would take £1 billion

out of public spending. They are very selective in what they describe as unsustainable.

Eradicating child poverty is the Government's top priority. Indeed, it should be the priority for all parties in the chamber, given that they unanimously supported the statutory child poverty targets. To help to achieve that, we will continue to invest in increasing people's income from social security and benefits as well as from employment and through reductions in the cost of living. Further, vitally, we will put in place the systems that are necessary to effectively scrap the two-child benefit cap in 2026, supported by £3 million in the budget for that work.

Today's Labour amendment complains that there is not enough focus on outcomes. I am, therefore, happy to tell the chamber that the outcome of scrapping Labour's two-child benefit cap will be a further 15,000 children lifted out of poverty. If Labour's position now is that it is against universal winter fuel payments for pensioners and scrapping the two-child benefit cap, I ask what on earth Labour is for.

This budget protects the social contract that is at the heart of this Government's approach. It includes free bus travel for young people under 22, as well as for those with eligible disabilities and the over-60s. It includes the universal reinstatement of the pension age winter heating payment, which was a core cross-party ask, with £101 million being invested for the benefit of pensioners across every constituency and region in Scotland.

Today is a bit of a Rubicon for the Conservatives. Morally and electorally, the question for the Tories is simple. Do they really think that they can stop the electoral threat that Reform poses to them through appeasement rather than principle? The answer is yes, they think so. Frankly, it is too late for the Conservative Party.

I move amendment S6M-15792.3, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"welcomes steps in the draft 2025-26 Budget to introduce a universal Winter Heating Payment and create the systems necessary to effectively scrap the two-child benefit cap in 2026, and looks forward to further engagement between the Scottish Government and the parties represented in the Parliament in advance of the next stage in the budget process."

15:07

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin with full-throated agreement with the cabinet secretary on the appalling motion that has been lodged today by the Conservatives. Frankly, it is beneath many of them and does a disservice to them. Seeking to pit one vulnerable group against

another in our society is simply unacceptable. It is the kind of politics that says, "I can only get on if others do not," and that is a politics that I entirely reject.

Asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They have fled unimaginable situations of war, famine and persecution.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, I will not.

Asylum seekers are not political pawns to be used by the Tory party to try to outflank Reform on the right. The motion has been condemned by the Catholic church and the Church of Scotland. I will read out some of their words, because I am angry about this.

The Church of Scotland urges

"all our politicians to use language which upholds human rights and human dignity for everyone in our society."

The Catholic church urges us all to

"welcome the stranger and ... love our neighbour as ourselves"

and says that that

"is particularly relevant as we approach the season of Christmas."

It continues:

"The Holy Family were themselves once refugees and the encouragement and solidarity we can show in our political debates to those who find themselves on the margins is as important as ever."

To have to explain Christmas to the Conservative Party—

Murdo Fraser: Is Mr Marra not a little bit embarrassed that he represents a party that has slashed the winter fuel allowance for the most vulnerable group of people in our society—pensioners? What a brass neck Mr Marra has.

Michael Marra: There is certainly a debate—it is one that we have regularly in this chamber—about the winter fuel payment, and there are also debates about how many parts of the budget might be spent. However, purposely pitting one group against another, not just in parliamentary motions but in graphics that are spread online, specifically offends us. There are many things in the budget with which we disagree, and the contrast in the motion could have been to waste, ferries or inefficiency, but instead you drew that one. You know why you have done it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Michael Marra: There are flaws in our tax system. As experts have told the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the Scottish system is unduly complex and economically inefficient. There are anomalies that are due to the interaction of the Scottish and UK systems, but the reform of the tax system that we actually need—not as proposed by the Conservatives today—does not equal the swingeing tax cuts that this country cannot afford. Frankly, we have been there before with the Conservatives.

There is a record £5 billion of additional funding in the Scottish budget for 2025-26. Let us be clear that the only reason that any of the measures in the draft budget is now possible is because of that record investment in Scotland, which has been delivered by a UK Labour Government. It is the largest settlement in the history of devolution. That is the difference that 37 Scottish Labour MPs speaking up for Scotland has made.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Would the member give way?

Michael Marra: Not at the moment, sir.

It is not easy. It is as a result of the dreadful inheritance that was left to us by the party opposite—the previous Conservative UK Government—that difficult decisions have had to be made to rebalance the public finances and deliver investment. The record investment is possible only because of those revenue-raising measures, including increasing employer national insurance contributions, ending VAT exemption on private school fees, and placing a proper windfall tax on oil and gas giants.

In the process of that UK budget, the SNP demanded £70 billion of additional spending, but, at every turn, it has opposed the means by which that money was raised. The SNP opposed £45 billion of revenue-raising measures, which meant that it demanded a net fiscal turnaround of £115 billion. Frankly, that is incredible.

Last week, the SNP came to the chamber and told us what it would spend the money on. This week, the Conservatives are calling for what they want the money to be spent on. However, neither party is prepared to accept any of the means by which the money was raised in the first place.

The draft budget was a missed opportunity—but certainly not in the way that Craig Hoy thinks. It is clear that Scotland is going in the wrong direction. Just this week, the figures show that teacher numbers fell by 621, that one in three children is routinely missing school, that A and E performance is at its worst point since January, and that GP numbers are falling.

Two weeks ago, Aberdeen royal infirmary was forced to declare a critical incident and divert

ambulances. The Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow is in a similar situation. All that is before the worst of winter bites. However, the First Minister insists that there is no need for a new direction.

Authoritative voices such as the Auditor General for Scotland, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Fraser of Allander Institute tell us again and again about the looming risks to Scotland's public finances that challenges such as an ageing population and the climate crisis pose. Those challenges mean that change is needed. It is not just a case of spending more money but spending the money differently and doing things differently.

Last month, the Auditor General was excoriating in his criticism of the Scottish Government's failure to deliver the necessary leadership to deliver a programme of reform. On the NHS, he said that

"fundamental change in how NHS services are provided is now urgently needed."

The budget was a wasted opportunity to set a new direction—to signal that the Scottish Government was listening to the Auditor General's increasingly exasperated warnings. However, responses to the budget were clear that it does nothing to address those challenges. David Phillips of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"It does not inspire confidence that much-needed reform will actually happen."

Roz Foyer, the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, said that the budget

"fails to tackle the big, transformative challenges Scotland faces and dodged the critical decisions we needed to see",

and that it is

"designed to set up the government for victory rather than set up Scotland for transformational change."

The Fraser of Allander Institute concluded that

"difficult decisions have been kicked into the future rather than planned for."

This budget will not deliver the new direction that our public services so obviously need. While the Tories, frankly, have lost the plot, the SNP has lost its way.

I move, as an amendment to motion S6M-15792, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"rejects wholly any attempt to pit vulnerable groups in Scottish society against one another for political ends; welcomes an additional £5 billion of investment in Scotland as a result of the UK Labour administration's Budget; regrets that the Scottish National Party (SNP) administration has had to use its draft Budget for 2025-26 to correct many of the mistakes that it made in its Budget for 2024-25; notes that the Auditor General, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute have variously criticised the SNP administration's failure to reform public services, and further notes with concern the

SNP administration's failure to address the challenges to long-term fiscal sustainability and its absence of a vision to improve outcomes for people across Scotland."

15:14

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Nasty and desperate—it is a description that fits the motion and the Conservative party that brought it here today after 14 years of incredible damage and deliberate harm by that party to society at large and to our most vulnerable communities in particular.

The Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland, the latter of which I am a member, made it clear to MSPs today that they expect us not to pit vulnerable groups against each other. Their call reminded me of the famous cartoon about Rupert Murdoch in which he is sitting round a table with two ordinary workers, one black and one white. Murdoch has a mountain of cookies on his plate, the black worker has one cookie and the white worker has none. Murdoch points at the black man and says to the white man, "He stole your cookie." That is the ethos of the Conservative Party—to sow division between ordinary people.

That is the Conservatives' ethos, because they exist to protect the interests of those who are really at fault. The Conservative Party exists to protect the company bosses who rake in huge profits while paying their workers poverty wages, the billionaires who hoard more wealth than they could spend in 100 lifetimes, and the landlords who hoard housing and trap their tenants with unaffordable rents. The enemies of ordinary people, Scottish or British, do not arrive by dinghy at Dover—they arrive in this country by private jet. The Tory Party has always been ready to stand in service of those real villains, not the general public.

We should be proud of Scotland's record on progressive taxation. Next year £1.7 billion is available for our public services as a result of the choices that we have made since 2017. What is that equivalent to? It is equivalent to funding the Scottish child payment, which lifts and holds tens of thousands of children out of poverty. It is the best start grant and the baby box, which, as the cabinet secretary pointed out, gets the Conservative Party irrationally angry. It is free bus travel for under-22s, which has been life-changing for so many young people, particularly those from our most deprived communities and those who are care experienced. It is the adult and child disability payment, which stands in stark contrast to the unbelievably cruel and denigrating system that the Conservative Party has designed at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Ross Greer sits on the Finance and Public

Administration Committee, as I do. He is well aware of what the Scottish Fiscal Commission has been saying for many months, which is that in Scotland we simply do not have the revenue to be able to pay for all the things that he has just listed. Is it not the case that we have to make some difficult choices to ensure that we get our fiscal sustainability back?

Ross Greer: On the principle of fiscal sustainability, I agree with Liz Smith. However, why, when the Conservative Party demands difficult choices, does it think that that always has to equate to cutting the services that the most vulnerable people rely on, rather than asking those with the broadest shoulders to pay a bit more to protect those services?

The doom-mongers on income tax in particular have been proven wrong. Since 2018, they have told us again and again of the huge shortfalls in revenue that would result from a more progressive system. That is not what has happened. Overall tax revenue is up. Inward migration into Scotland from the rest of the UK—including of higher earners—is positive. It is absolutely fair to want more data on the impacts of behaviour change that could have arisen as a result of income tax changes—for example, on whether pension contributions have risen as a form of tax avoidance. However, it is not right to claim disaster without evidence.

The same applies to land and buildings transaction tax. The evidence has shown consistently for years that LBTT is outperforming projections. In response to the Conservative suggestion that we cut LBTT, I would point out that there is also years of evidence, from across the UK and elsewhere, that cutting such taxes does not help first-time buyers, because it increases property prices. Such cuts are better for the people selling than for the people trying to buy and get on the property ladder in the first place.

Even increasing the additional dwelling supplement has not made a dent in revenue. Frankly, that one probably should have done so, because it is designed in part to effect behaviour change and reduce the number of second and holiday homes. I welcome that the Scottish Government has agreed to the Green proposal to increase that supplement again, which should raise more revenue but, I hope, also have the behaviour change impact that will help us to tackle the housing crisis.

Scotland, like every other developed nation and many others, faces huge challenges, with unacceptable levels of child poverty for such a wealthy country, climate and nature crises that are out of control, and massive challenges with mental and physical health. The free market will not solve those challenges. Government needs to lead

efforts to solve them, and the public want and expect us all to do that.

Those challenges are different for different groups in society, and there are two Green proposals on the budget that demonstrate that. The first is on free ferry travel for young islanders, which recognises that under-22 free bus travel has benefited young people in island communities but not to the same extent as it has benefited young people on the mainland. Those in island communities deserve recognition of the fact that ferries are key to their lives.

The second is on free bus travel for people seeking asylum, and the key word there is “people”—these are people seeking asylum. As a country and as a society, it is a privilege to be in a position to help the most vulnerable. The Tories talk about value for money, and there is huge value for money here, because people cannot integrate or participate in their community if they are isolated. They cannot access healthcare, which ends up costing the NHS much more later on. Of course, it would be far easier to support people seeking asylum if the UK Government had simply given them the right to work in the first place.

The reality is that the Conservatives want a smaller Scotland and a smaller UK. They want us to be more isolated. They want less investment. They do not want to realise the potential of this country. They do not want us to live up to the privilege and the duty that we have to support the most vulnerable people across the world. Fortunately, this afternoon will prove to them that they are very much in a small minority in having that sad view of what this country can be.

15:21

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I usually rise and talk about being pleased to speak in debates in the Parliament. It is a privilege to speak here, but I do not feel that today. This is a thoroughly depressing afternoon. I look across at the Conservative benches and I see a number of parliamentarians whom I respect very greatly and who often raise the standard of public debate in this place to the very pinnacle, and I cannot believe that the motion is drafted in their name today. I hope that they take a long, hard look at themselves. If there were not so much to refute in the motion and so much to debate against it, I would not want to give it the time of day, so shrivelled and miserly it is.

Michael Marra is quite right in his amendment to call out the Conservatives for cynically pitting two groups of very vulnerable people in Scotland against each other—pensioners and refugees. In the same breath, the Conservatives seek to strip

hundreds of millions of pounds out of our budget through unfunded tax breaks. It is possible to argue against a policy with decency and without condemning it, as the Conservative motion proposes, especially when we are discussing a group of people who the Scottish Refugee Council tells us may be living on as little as £1.36 a day.

If the Scottish Conservatives are genuinely interested in value to taxpayers, they should consider what free bus travel can mean for integration, early intervention, getting to Home Office appointments or accessing language sessions to help to integrate the refugee community into Scotland, which they want to make their home. The policy would free up capacity in the charities that spend time and money helping people to get to where they need to be.

If we want to reduce the cost of supporting asylum seekers—as we all do—let us talk about lifting the ban on their working if they have been waiting more than three months for a Home Office decision, so that they can support themselves and contribute back to the country in which they have sought safe harbour.

Our immigration system was broken by the Conservatives, whose dysfunctionality made the asylum backlog soar. By closing down safe and legal routes to sanctuary, the Conservatives left desperate people to make perilous attempts to cross the Channel in leaky boats, in the hands of criminal smugglers and traffickers. If the Conservatives were genuinely interested in value for money for taxpayers and in common sense, they would not have wasted £700 million on the shameful and morally bankrupt Rwanda plan.

The SNP Government can get by without winning many votes. In a Parliament of minorities, it does not need to pass legislation, although voters are entitled to question why it wants to be in power if it does not do so. However, it is practically impossible to run the country if you cannot pass a budget for the year ahead. Therein lies the rub and the dilemma that Scottish ministers currently face. We know that the SNP has been in power for too long and that its 17-year record is now catching up with it.

Just look at what we have learned so far in this week alone. More people are stuck in hospital than ever before, unable to return home or to a care home because the care system is on its knees. There are fewer GPs, family carers are struggling to get by, and the number of people waiting 12 hours in A and E is 139 times worse than it was when the SNP came to power. The SNP promised thousands more teachers, but we have seen their numbers reduce by 621 this year. More of them are stuck on temporary contracts, and pupils are not getting the in-class support that they need.

The Liberal Democrats know that the only thing that would truly bring about the change that Scotland needs is a change of Government. To me, that sounds like an enticing prospect, but it is not as simple as that. If we reach the start of a new financial year and the Parliament has failed to pass a budget and to agree tax rates, things will quickly break down.

Against the reality of that backdrop, my party and I have sought to find common ground and to improve the lot of our constituents in the pages of the draft Scottish budget. We are still some way from a deal with ministers—our support is not guaranteed—but, as I told members last week, we can see significant Liberal Democrat demands baked into the pages of the budget's first draft. There is the reinstatement of the winter fuel allowance for pensioners and spending on social care, affordable homes, family carers, additional support needs, GPs, dentists, long Covid, the Belford hospital in Fort William and Edinburgh's eye pavilion—I could go on. Those were all key Liberal Democrat demands, and they are in the budget because of us. Our priorities reflect our continued commitment to getting constituents fast access to healthcare, fighting for a fair deal for carers, lifting up Scottish education and growing our economy. Those are the issues that come up in my surgeries—and, I am sure, in yours, Presiding Officer—week in and week out, which is why we are determined to put them there, front and centre.

There are now eight weeks before Parliament votes on the budget. Whether we back the budget in the final analysis will depend on the detail of the commitments made so far and what progress is offered on the other key priorities that we will lay out. As I said in my intervention on the cabinet secretary, business rates relief does not go far enough. I also want to see money dedicated to alleviating the drugs death crisis, which remains one of the worst in the world. We need that spending protected.

Our nurseries need fair funding if they are to deliver the affordability and flexibility that working families in modern life still need. In a Parliament of minorities, it is incumbent on all parties to pore over the detail, make the case for our constituents, find common ground where we can and try to make a way forward in the budget.

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

15:27

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Perhaps Michael Marra should turn his anger on his own party for cutting the winter fuel allowance. How

many pensioners must die before he speaks out against that disgusting Labour policy?

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a practising NHS GP.

The Scottish Conservative motion—

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Sandesh Gulhane: You have had your turn. Have a seat.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Dr Gulhane, through the chair, please.

Sandesh Gulhane: The Scottish Conservatives motion rightly critiques the draft Scottish budget for 2025-26 for failing to deliver value for taxpayers and failing to adequately audit where every penny goes and what output we get. The budget perpetuates the SNP Administration's high-tax agenda, which stifled economic growth and left Scotland's vital public services, particularly health and social care, in crisis. Labour's destructive policies, such as the national insurance hikes, have led to that damage becoming catastrophic.

Both parties claim to be progressive, but in reality, they are anything but. The SNP boasts about allocating £21 billion to health and social care, including a £2 billion increase for front-line NHS boards—a so-called record uplift—but what does that mean in practice? It is more hollow promises with no coherent plan. Money does not replace leadership. Access to GP appointments is worse than ever, A and E waiting times are catastrophic, and delayed discharges have reached an all-time high. Throwing money at problems without a strategy is not governance; it is negligence.

Audit Scotland's scathing assessment makes it clear that fundamental change in how NHS services are provided is urgently needed, yet the Government continues to dodge difficult decisions by offering vague intentions instead of actionable solutions. Scotland does not need more empty rhetoric; we need leadership with the courage to act.

The reality is damning. Dr Iain Kennedy of the British Medical Association highlights the lack of resources and strategic direction. Colin Poolman of the Royal College of Nursing Scotland described SNP workforce planning as disastrous, leading to record delays in discharges, ballooning waiting lists and cancer treatment targets that have been unmet for more than a decade. The SNP has left the NHS in a perpetual crisis that fails both patients and healthcare professionals. This debate marks an interesting and critical opportunity to spotlight the severe challenges that are faced by staff and patients.

John Mason: Sandesh Gulhane seems to be arguing for providing more resources to the NHS. Would he support using tax increases to do that?

Sandesh Gulhane: Absolutely not. We need to use our money more wisely and know where every penny goes. It is not about inputs; it is about outputs.

In Drumchapel, four GP practices serve 17,000 patients in a crumbling facility that is ill equipped to meet the area's growing healthcare needs, which include longer appointments that are necessitated by language barriers among asylum seekers who are going to Drumchapel. Urgent upgrades are overdue and the Scottish Government must prioritise addressing those deteriorating conditions.

The Scottish Conservatives offer a better way. We would prioritise primary care, committing 12 per cent of the NHS budget to it immediately and increasing that to 15 per cent within three years. By strengthening our GP services, we would move healthcare closer to people's homes. That focus on preventative medicine would also reduce hospital strain and improve patient outcomes. We would slim down an obese bureaucracy. That is not just fiscal prudence; it is transformative healthcare delivery.

On mental health, the SNP budget is equally deficient. While overall health spending has reached record levels, mental health funding has been cut from a promised £290 million to £270.5 million. That reduction is a slap in the face to those struggling with mental health issues. We would ring fence mental health funding to ensure that it receives the attention that it deserves.

Labour fares no better. Its national insurance hikes threaten health and social care providers. GP practices face an average cost increase of £20,000, while charities like C-Change Scotland are being pushed to the brink. C-Change employs 235 staff and projects additional costs of £183,000 due to those national insurance hikes, jeopardising its ability to provide essential services. Hard-pressed charities that are delivering public services cannot absorb such financial pressures.

The SNP's warped priorities exacerbate these crises. The SNP consistently chooses ideology over pragmatism, leaving ordinary Scots to pay the price. This Parliament must confront the harsh reality: the SNP's record on healthcare is one of failure and Labour's policy is making things worse. Scotland deserves better.

15:32

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): We have had 14 years of clear evidence that the Tories certainly do not have the answers,

particularly given the chaos that they left the economy in when they squirrelled out of office early in July.

This is one of those days on which the Opposition declares the SNP Government's draft budget to be tantamount to the end of civilisation as we know it, while Scottish ministers view it as a vital step on the road to a land of milk and honey. Of course, the reality is somewhere in between, which is why it is important for each party to be open-minded about what can be achieved in the weeks ahead and about where compromise can be reached and a balance can be struck. Grandstanding has no place in these deliberations. Therefore, it was disappointing to read Russell Findlay's rather terse letter of 18 November to the First Minister, in which he huffily declared:

"We don't agree with your spending commitments, so we expect you will look elsewhere for a budget deal."

Regardless of what the 2025-26 budget might contain, the Tories, who are constantly looking over their shoulders as their votes, members and councillors drift to Reform, will not play ball. Therefore, the demands that they make in their motion are meaningless. If the Tories have the fully costed proposals that Mr Findlay promised, where are they? Today's motion has more holes than a Swiss cheese. It is interesting that, in the debate that will follow this one, Jeremy Balfour will call for £10 million for changing places toilets. Why is that cost not included in the Tory motion?

The Tories now talk about outcomes. That will come as a surprise to many, because the Tories have demanded more money for free school meals, winter heating, the ScotRail peak fare subsidy and a plethora of other areas that would have cost more than £2 billion since early September alone. We have heard about some of those areas today. Dr Gulhane talked about Hindi translation services. I do not know whether they have worked out what the cost of those services would come to, but it seems to be just another Tory addition that they never actually give us the cost for.

Russell Findlay has called for the social security budget to be looked at, whatever that means. I doubt that that is the view of Jeremy Balfour, who, earlier this year, called for social security spending to be the Scottish Government's "number 1 priority".

Jeremy, Miles Briggs and Roz McCall all supported Paul Sweeney's parliamentary motion last year on free bus travel for people seeking asylum. I trust that, today, they will have the courage of their convictions and will not support the Tories' reprehensible motion.

As one might expect of a disciple of the discredited Liz Truss—Prime Minister only two years ago, let us not forget—Mr Findlay has no clue about the numbers. To be fair, he has only got so many fingers and toes.

The Tories' ostrich approach of closing Scotland's international offices shows that they do not want to attract investment and jobs to Scotland. Those offices strongly contribute to Scotland's position as the top destination for foreign direct investment out of the UK's 12 nations and regions outside of London, according to EY's annual attractiveness survey. The Canada office has supported more than £120 million in planned capital investment, while the office in Washington DC has supported more than 360 companies. The Tories want to put that at risk. Closing the offices seems to me to be more about marginalising the Scottish Parliament than about common sense.

Are the Tories keen on low taxation? If so, why did they vote against this year's council tax freeze, or deliver the highest UK tax burden since the war? Tory-led Aberdeenshire Council is considering a 17 per cent council tax rise, compared to a rise of 5 per cent for SNP-led North Ayrshire Council and one of 3 per cent for SNP-run Dundee City Council. The Tories demand that Scottish ministers cut income tax to 19 per cent for those earning up to £43,662—a rate lower than they set in any of the 14 years when they formed the UK Government. Of course, doing that would easily cost more than half a billion pounds, based on the 2022-23 Scottish income tax outturn statistics. Where would they find that money?

Old lags will recall when, in 2009, Labour came to the then finance secretary John Swinney with a list of demands that he would have to meet to secure their votes for the budget. After Mr Swinney met their demands in full, Labour reneged on the deal and, when it was first presented, the budget fell. A week later, the budget was re-presented without a single word being changed, and a curmudgeonly Labour Party voted for it to avoid an election in which its defeat looked certain. Such antics take us nowhere.

Since July, with its big brother now in office at Westminster, Scottish Labour has been more cautious. First, it backed the UK's decision to deprive most of Scotland's pensioners of their winter fuel payments, before it clumsily reversed gear a few weeks later. We now hear fewer demands for the Scottish child payment to increase to £40 a week, given that the equivalent payment in England and Wales under Labour is precisely zero. It is now less about inputs than it is about outputs for Labour, too. We will see. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, resource spending will be only £400 million higher

in real terms, and that is before we consider the impact of increases to national insurance contributions.

There are many aspects of last week's budget that we can and should support, regardless of party affiliation. Spending for the Scottish Police Authority is increasing by 4.5 per cent; housing investment is up by more than 57 per cent to £768 million, which will support the delivery of 8,000 new affordable homes; and the education and skills budget is increasing by 3 per cent over and above inflation. Locally, for me, funding for NHS Ayrshire and Arran is up by a whopping £123.1 million—13.9 per cent—taking it to more than £1 billion. Across Scotland, more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties will pay less tax than they would anywhere else in the UK, with more than 100,000 properties being taken out of paying rates altogether.

The UK Labour Government's decision to raise employer national insurance contributions adds £549 million to the cost of delivering Scotland's public services, while bodies such as independent care homes, charities and universities must find £210 million to meet rising national insurance costs.

While Labour and the Tories play politics, funding for essential services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure is being held hostage. Meanwhile, the SNP Government is backing the people's priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, improving public services and tackling the climate emergency.

It is clear that today's hand-knitted Tory motion is incoherent as well as shameless. By contrast, if the budget passes, it will deliver for Scotland's communities and businesses by supporting a wide range of services, many of which are not provided elsewhere in the UK, including free prescriptions and free higher education. The Scottish people expect their elected representatives to set our differences aside and deliver on the priorities of people across Scotland. That will happen only by supporting the budget.

15:39

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It has certainly been an interesting debate. I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which sets out that I am a small-scale farmer.

The initial excitement that I felt as I sat through my very first budget statement last week was, sadly, quite short lived, because what I got was a budget that will be deeply damaging to rural Scotland. Many people will still be paying more tax in Scotland than they would do if they lived anywhere else in the UK; many will still pay more

in land and buildings transaction tax than they would under the equivalent tax in England and Wales; and small business owners will pay more tax because the Scottish Government chose not to extend vital business rates relief to pubs and restaurants.

However, for rural communities such as the many in my region, the budget cuts even deeper. When the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands and her minister addressed the large crowd of farmers outside this very building only a few short weeks ago, they said that they would listen to their rallying cry for help and would reflect it in the budget. Did the SNP really listen? No. It cut the rural budget in real terms. The Institute of Fiscal Studies confirmed a 3.1 per cent real-terms cut. Justify that, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Facts are important. The rural budget increases by £22 million in real terms going into 2025-26, taking resource and capital together. The farmers wanted the payments in capital rather than resource, and there is £22 million more for the rural budget. Get your facts straight.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that they should be speaking through the chair—that goes for all sides.

Tim Eagle, I can give you the time back.

Tim Eagle: The cabinet secretary really needs to go and have a discussion with the Institute for Fiscal Studies because that is not what its report said. The rural portfolio was the only area to receive a real-terms cut. Even the SNP Government's constitution directorate—in other words the department that promotes Scottish separation—received a real-terms rise.

That is what this Government thinks of rural Scotland. It is a real kick in the teeth for Scotland's farmers, crofters, land managers and rural communities. The NFUS and Countryside Alliance Scotland described the real-terms funding cut as "disappointing", with the latter commenting that

"Holyrood needs to start taking rural Scotland more seriously."

Scottish Land & Estates said that rural Scotland has been "sidelined" in the budget and that the budget does little to "move the dial" on supporting communities in the long term.

To top it all off, the SNP's cast-iron promise to return the £46 million that was taken in previous years sees that money return over two years—maybe—in a capital transformation scheme about which we have no detail. There was a call for multiyear funding, but, again, it is undelivered. There is an argument that the SNP could, if it so chose, guarantee a minimum funding level for

future years, assuming that the money is forthcoming from the UK Government. I do not believe that it is unreasonable to ask for that, but the Government did not deliver it.

We could and should be doing more, and I am proud of the Scottish Conservative party for standing up for our rural communities. The SNP's route map tells us little about what future support will look like for our farmers. What of the agri-environment climate scheme, which has seen a reduction in funding? Will that be accessible once again? I doubt it. The less favoured area support scheme is still being paid at a level that was set in 2018, and there is no change to basic payment scheme rates. I could go on.

Woodland funding has increased by 20 per cent, but that follows a 41 per cent cut in the previous year. The £90 million for peatland and trees is welcome, but will it really be enough to cover the ambitions that the Scottish Government has set? A carbon land tax has been mentioned—another tax from this Government that we do not know anything about. NatureScot, which delivers much of what I have talked about, has had a £9.9 million funding cut, and nature restoration funding has had a £4.2 million cut.

It is not just our farmers who have been hit by the budget. Scotland's marine sector has also been landed with what looks like a real-terms cut of £3 million. We are simply not doing enough to look after our fishermen. There are far too many stories of poor science and unknown landings. The marine directorate is far from perfect and, having spoken to numerous fishing organisations, many want significant reforms in the area. However, any reform or improvements will not be delivered by slashing budgets.

My worry is that the cuts represent an anti-rural Scotland attitude.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Tim Eagle: The simple fact is that, time and again, the SNP has put the interests of rural communities on the back burner while continuing to plough money into niche, Holyrood bubble issues. Whether it is boosting the budget for the growing number of international offices or sending money to foreign states for climate reparations, the SNP has completely lost touch with what taxpayers expect of the Scottish Government.

The budget should have been a game-changer for rural Scotland. At a time when rural communities are facing the challenges of depopulation, a lack of housing, a lack of reliable transport options, a lack of adequate connectivity

infrastructure and a lack of access to local NHS and social care services, the SNP budget has been found wanting. More broadly, the Government could have taken bold action to give taxpayers a boost, home buyers a helping hand and struggling businesses some relief.

There is another way, as set out by my colleague Craig Hoy. We can cut taxes to stimulate spending and growth. We can help young people get on to the property ladder. We can support businesses by reducing the tax burden on them so that they can invest. Those are perfectly reasonable things to do. The Scottish Conservative plan would open up Scotland's economy, give businesses hope again and put more money into people's pockets. That would boost us all, including the rural Scotland that was left behind last week.

15:44

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

When I read the Scottish Tory party's motion for the debate, I felt a sense of sadness and despair that a mainstream political party in Scotland would put forward such a motion. Many members in the chamber felt that sense of despair, but we were not the only ones to do so. The Church of Scotland and the Scottish Catholic church have issued a statement in which they urge MSPs to resist pitting vulnerable groups in our society against one another.

The chair of Justice and Peace Scotland has also issued a statement, which I want to put on the record. She said:

"As we strive to realise social justice for all in our society, Justice & Peace Scotland remind everyone of Christ's teaching to welcome the stranger and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This is particularly relevant as we approach the season of Christmas: The Holy Family were themselves once refugees and the encouragement and solidarity we can show in our political debates to those who find themselves on the margins is as important as ever.

In this season of goodwill to all people I hope that all these discussions will be characterised in a spirit of kindness and generosity."

That is why Labour's amendment starts by rejecting wholly

"any attempt to pit vulnerable groups in Scottish society against one another for political ends".

I appeal to the Tory party in Scotland not to go down the road of trying to create division. We have had enough division in our society. There is enough division in the world without trying to create more division simply to score cheap political points here and there.

I also point out to the Tory party that we cannot approach the debate on the budget and the

massive challenges that we face in Scotland by simply ignoring the failure of Tory austerity and the impact that that has had on communities and people up and down Scotland. Local services have been impacted, the cost of living has increased and poverty rates are rising. Even the International Monetary Fund concluded that the Conservative Party's austerity policies did more harm than good. That is the starting point for our attempts to rebuild our society, and it would be good if Craig Hoy and the Tories could at least acknowledge that.

Turning to the SNP and its budget, my concern—I have continually raised it in the chamber—is that there is a failure to join up the budget with policy. Far too often in my years in this place, I have seen the SNP Government throw money at things without having any clear strategies or policies on how they will address those issues or any indication of the outcomes that they want from throwing money at those things.

There are many examples of that, such as the failure in social care. I have argued in committee and with ministers that one of the clear failures in social care is the failure to properly pay carers—to give them decent pay and decent terms and conditions. Although some progress has been made, it is not enough. At the same time, the Government has been trying to implement a national care service; it has spent £20 million so far and made no difference whatsoever—the problems are still there.

As we see the massive pressure on our acute services and the ambulances queueing up outside hospitals, we are told that that is a result of bed blocking, but it is a result of the failure to address problems in social care. That situation is an example of a waste of money, a failure to do proper workforce planning across a range of services and—I stress—a failure to work with local government and to see it as a key partner.

Over many years, what we have seen from the SNP Government has been a centralisation of local services and a power grab from local government in favour of this Parliament. I have commented before that the Government has almost tried to turn this place into the

"big toun cooncil of Scotland".—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2022; c 203]

That would not be so bad if the Government was any good at delivering the services.

If we want to get more for our resources, we must build partnerships with those on the ground who are able to deliver. I could go through item after item of failure after failure, because the Government has failed to link the budget with policy, build a partnership with local government and deliver for Scotland.

I hope that the Government will change tack and start to work with local authorities and our partners, and I hope that it will invest in people in social care and elsewhere.

15:51

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Today, we are being asked to debate, at best, half a motion. Some of its points have been eloquently dealt with by many in the chamber, and I add my voice to those who are dismayed by the attempt to isolate asylum seekers and deny them support.

The rest of the motion is full of sound and fury—rather than signifying nothing, it shows a lack of any coherent analysis or proposals. The Tories imply that they are concerned about growth but, by arguing for a significant reduction in tax take—while lacking any precision on the scale of that—they offer us in effect a return to austerity. They are unable—or is it unwilling?—to specify precisely where their main cuts will fall, and that is the rub.

Much of what is in the Scottish budget has been widely welcomed—not, of course, by the Tories, but by many key groups in our society. As the Scottish Fiscal Commission has specified, there is a considerable uplift in many critical areas, including 11.1 per cent real-terms growth in the net zero and energy portfolio; 3.7 per cent real-terms growth in the Deputy First Minister's economy portfolio; and 3 per cent real-terms growth in education and skills. Those three areas are central not only to growth but to the type of sustainable growth that is much needed in Scotland; all speak to the focus on the type of investment that is needed to support sustainable growth. How much of that would the Tory's proposals compromise? Their motion is silent on that point, which tells us much about this latest version of the Tories—not so much a shot in the arm as a shot in the dark.

Of course, I would want us to move further in the opposite direction from the Tories to enhance growth. Projections at both UK and Scotland levels suggest that the available increased expenditure from the capital budget will provide stimulus for growth but that it will be noticeable primarily in the short term. For the medium and long-term growth that we require, we must find a way to further increase investment for growth.

In that regard, I say again that the constraints on Scottish Government borrowing in the current fiscal framework are unwelcome. I have regularly argued that we need the freedom of independence to maximise our capacity for investment, because the unionist parties are opposed to giving the Scottish Government the necessary freedom to borrow in order to invest. That said, I continue to

watch with interest the potential for a bond for capital investment, and I am sure that we will hear more about that in due course.

Given my interest in music and culture, and as chair of the cross-party group on music, I very much welcome the Government's commitment to a significant increase in the culture budget. Scotland's cultural assets are not simply nice to have; they make a huge contribution to the attractiveness of Scotland—not least for the tourism sector, as a place to do business and for highly skilled individuals to develop careers. That is investment for the enhancement of our quality of life and I applaud the Government's actions in that area.

I also very much welcome the reinstated investment commitment for housing. Indeed, investment in house building and renovation not only has benefits for individual living but is a particularly effective form of investment for encouraging growth, with a significant multiplier effect.

Members will know that I have long made commentary on ScotWind money, so I was pleased to note that the £300 million will be protected going forward, and I was pleased to note the allocation of £25 million for green supply chains. I will continue to retain an interest in the effective use of those funds.

My final comments reference the Labour Party amendment. Of course I agree that it is important to address long-term challenges of fiscal sustainability, but I remind the Labour Party that the Scottish Government has had to abide by an age of austerity that was ushered in by the Tories and has now regrettably been adopted with enthusiasm by the Labour Party, which appears to be making the very same mistakes as the Tories did, with its low-growth budget and continued adoption of Brexit.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Does the member not at least acknowledge that the UK Government has raised money through fiscal measures and extended an additional £5 billion through Barnett consequentials? That might not go as far as she would like, but will she acknowledge that that is quite different from budgets under the previous UK Government?

Michelle Thomson: I absolutely acknowledge the increased amounts, particularly in revenue, but my point is that considerably more needs to be done for the UK budget to be considered in any way as going for growth. That is not just my view—that argument has been made extensively by other bodies.

As for vision, the SNP has it in droves. That is why people look with envy to Scotland protecting the weakest and most vulnerable people. There is

no bolder vision for me than an independent country taking its place in the world with a vibrant, dynamic economy that supports treating its citizens with dignity and respect, and where there is hope for a better future for young people.

The choice today is between a half-baked motion and a return to austerity or the path of progress that is being taken by the Scottish Government. It is an easy choice, and I will happily oppose the motion.

15:57

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As far as I understand it, the Scottish Government's argument for its determination to mitigate the two-child cap—apart from, of course, wanting to wrong foot Scottish Labour ahead of the 2026 election campaign—is that the mitigation is an integral part of the so-called social contract with the people of Scotland. The problem is that, apart from the fact that a very large chunk of the electorate wants to retain the two-child cap, the policy has not been costed. In fact, we have no idea how much it will cost. The Scottish Government seems to be telling us that it will cost between £100 million and £150 million, but that seems to change by the day, whereas the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Scottish Fiscal Commission put the total somewhere around the £300 million mark.

All that comes at the same time as the Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates a fiscal uplift of £578 million for social security between this year and next, but the Scottish Government tells us that it will be £800 million. I do not need a calculator, cabinet secretary, to work out that that gap is £222 million. It is therefore little wonder that Professor Graeme Roy has rightly described the move as “a fiscal risk”.

Shona Robison: Will Liz Smith give way?

Liz Smith: Yes, if the cabinet secretary wants to explain how Graeme Roy is wrong.

Shona Robison: The Scottish Fiscal Commission will cost the policy fully over the coming weeks, as Liz Smith knows, but, talking about fiscal gaps, where would the £1 billion of tax cuts fall in public sector expenditure? We have not heard any answers to that so far. Will Liz Smith tell us where those cuts would fall?

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

Liz Smith: Liz Smith will be very happy to spell out some of that in due course. What the cabinet secretary has to answer is why people such as the very respected Graeme Roy are saying that there is a very considerable fiscal risk in the Scottish Government's budget proposals. In fact, the Fraser of Allander Institute says that the

“lack of detail is troubling”

and that

“There are far too many unknowns.”

Worse still, by introducing the policy,

“a week and a day”

beyond the SFC's deadline, as Professor Roy described it, the SNP has gone against all the warnings by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, Audit Scotland and the Finance and Public Administration Committee that there needs to be far more transparency about Scottish Government budget projections and much greater accuracy of costs. The cabinet secretary is having a go at other parties about costs when she should look closer to home.

On line 2 of table 2.5 of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's most recent report, under the heading “Public sector pay metrics”, the Scottish Fiscal Commission had to write the word “blank” for three years in a row because there was not a public sector pay policy. Instead, there were above-inflation pay awards to the public sector—which were considerably higher than in the rest of the UK—for nothing in return.

At the weekend, the Auditor General reminded us that the medium-term financial strategy is delayed yet again. There has been no detail on public sector reform. Indeed, it could be argued—although I hope that it is not true—that the fact that the Scottish Government has received an increased block grant will be used as an excuse not to engage in more public sector reform. I do not understand why ministers cannot see that.

The Scottish Government's priorities are all about increasing benefits under the aegis of the social contract, without the necessary evidence—whether qualitative or quantitative—about which social policies actually deliver positive, measurable outcomes. That comes at the expense of prioritising the needs of business, which is deeply alarming for business, hospitality and the tourism sector.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: Do I have time to take one, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There is time for a brief intervention.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to Liz Smith for taking my intervention. Does she recognise that enabling refugees—some of whom live on less than £2 a day—to travel around the country to better integrate into the societies in which they have settled and sought safe harbour is a positive

social outcome that every member of the chamber should aspire to?

Liz Smith: It is about making choices; we could argue very strongly that we do not want to cause any detrimental impact to pensioners. What I am saying—and this is very important to the future debate on social security payments—is that we need to ensure that we have the evidence available to decide where we put the important spending of very limited resources. In this instance, the amount of money that pensioners could get is far more important than, in many cases, it is for asylum seekers.

I will finish on that point, because when it comes to the Scottish Government's budget proposals, it is all very well to say that this is a wonderful budget, but it is not a wonderful budget at all, because the arithmetic has not been done properly. That is why economic analysts are very critical of it.

16:02

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I will start by taking up the comment that Craig Hoy made earlier, which was, unsurprisingly, on Ferguson Marine Port Glasgow. Craig Hoy did his colleague Graham Simpson a disservice because Graham Simpson has taken part in the round-table discussions about the yard and investment, and he has been supportive of the workforce at the yard. Earlier, Craig Hoy touched on the fact that the Glen Sannox is no longer there. That is true, thankfully. However, the Glen Rosa is still being outfitted, and if there is no money going to Ferguson's, work on the Glen Rosa will not happen, the ferry will not be finished and island communities will not get the ferry. I am sorry, but Mr Hoy was absolutely incorrect in his assertion and in the comments that he made earlier.

The Scottish Tories' motion says it all about their thinking, and they are clearly rattled by the challenge on the political right. The motion is nothing short of an attempt to pit one vulnerable group against another. It has already been touched on in the chamber, but the Tories would do well to heed the joint statement that was issued today by the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Catholic church. Jill Kent, the chairperson of Justice and Peace Scotland, said:

"The Holy Family were themselves once refugees and the encouragement and solidarity we can show in our political debates to those who find themselves on the margins is as important as ever."

The joint statement also highlights how important that small investment will be for people who are not permitted to work and who are often living on as little as £8.86 per week. For asylum

seekers, public transport is completely unaffordable—as Alex Cole-Hamilton just touched on in his question. In Glasgow, a day ticket costs £5.60. That equals more than half of the weekly allowance of people who are seeking asylum. Access to free bus travel would be positively life changing and mentally transformative for those who are otherwise stuck in an inadequate and slow asylum system. Surely, this £2 million is an investment to help keep people out of accessing mental health services in the NHS.

During the Tories' 14 years in government, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, irrespective of their circumstances, were labelled as being the source of the UK's problems. Many asylum seekers reside in my constituency and have for several years now, and yet they are prevented from working. Asylum support provides just £49.18 per person per week—or just £8.86 per person per week if they are in supported accommodation.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, but I need to make some progress. I will try to get Mr Kerr in later.

That leaves just £7.02 per day for essentials such as transport, or just £1.36 per day if someone is in supported accommodation.

We have all seen how the Tories treat asylum seekers—by leaving them languishing in accommodation while their applications take an age. Labour, historically, was a party that was known for its social democratic values. Surely, then, it should be the Labour UK Government that is pledging to support asylum seekers and to speed up the asylum process across the UK. I am not sure whether that will happen because, as we have already seen, it is the Labour UK Government that has removed the winter fuel payment from millions of pensioners and has allowed children to remain in poverty by continuing with the two-child cap.

The Tory motion also mentions a tax system. In Scotland, those with the broadest shoulders pay a little bit more, enabling Scotland to spend more on the things that matter most and on policies that people elsewhere in the UK do not have. Free prescriptions, free university tuition and the game-changing Scottish child payment are just three examples of SNP delivery. That is a far cry from the Tory policies that are designed to enrich their friends while making the average member of the public worse off.

Plus, Opposition parties never mention that, when taking tax and social security choices together, more than 60 per cent of Scots are set to be better off in 2025-26 because they live in Scotland. The SNP does not need to take any

lessons on the economy or taxation from the party that gave us Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng.

It is worth reminding the chamber that, as has been the case for each of its 17 budgets, this SNP Scottish Government sets balanced budgets, because it can only spend what it is given. There is a welcome funding increase from the Labour UK Government for 2025-26, but it does not go far enough. It will certainly not unravel 14 years of Tory austerity—something that the Labour Party has acknowledged time and again in the chamber over the last wee while.

Daniel Johnson: Stuart McMillan says that the increase does not go far enough, but the SNP revenue-raising measures would have raised only £16 billion. Our budget raised more than £40 billion. Likewise, on capital budgets, it increased by 12 per cent, which was apparently one of the key issues that the SNP had—so where does the increase not go far enough?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have about 30 seconds, Mr McMillan.

Stuart McMillan: No problem. Thank you, Presiding Officer.

That is the thing—the UK Government is giving with one hand but taking away with the other because of the national insurance contributions. As Mr Johnson will know, that will affect public authorities, the third sector and the private sector across Scotland.

The economic aspects of today's debate were typical of each of the parties, but the othering of one vulnerable group, pitting them against another group, is a new low from the Scottish Tory front-bench members. There will certainly be some Scottish Tory MSPs who will be ashamed of that position, and I do not blame them.

16:09

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I share the dismay and frustration expressed by members across the chamber at today's motion, which was lodged by the Conservative Party. It is increasingly clear that the Tories are desperately in pursuit of voters on their right flank and are therefore seeking to replicate the divisive politics that we have seen play out in the Reform UK Party. Today, they have chosen to punch down on people seeking asylum in Scotland in pursuit of that pretty ignoble objective.

These are people in this country who have fled persecution, political oppression and conflict. That is the point. They are not an abstract persona, as the Tories would have us believe—they are people who desperately need our help. I know that first hand, because I represent around 90 per cent of the people who are seeking asylum in Scotland.

Since I launched the campaign to extend concessionary bus travel to asylum seekers in Scotland with the Red Cross voices network and Maryhill Integration Network three years ago this week, the campaign has enjoyed robust support across civil society and the third sector and, crucially, cross-party support in the Parliament, including from Conservative members, as has been mentioned. It is disappointing that the Tories' new leadership has turned its back on the most vulnerable in our society, with both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland uniting to issue a statement to condemn the party's mendacious cynicism. It is particularly pernicious as it is the middle of the season of Advent.

Around 5,000 of the approximately 5,500 people who are seeking asylum in Scotland live in Glasgow, along with the member for Maryhill and Springburn, from whom I am happy to take an intervention.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I commend Paul Sweeney for his role in the campaign to secure free bus travel for asylum seekers, which I was happy to support on a cross-party basis. I detest the Conservative Party's position on that. Would Mr Sweeney support on a cross-party basis the submission that the Scottish Government has made to the UK Government on the right-to-work pilot for asylum seekers, which would further the rights of the most vulnerable and isolated in society?

Paul Sweeney: I thank Mr Doris and Mr Ruskell for their early and critical support in the Parliament of the objectives of the free bus travel project. Indeed, I share his sentiments. As co-conveners of the cross-party group on migration, we have long sought to achieve that in the UK, and we would like to see progress being made to give people who are seeking asylum the right to work after an appropriate period of time, rather than the interminable limbo that so many are kept in. I agree with Mr Doris's point. The limbo that asylum seekers are kept in is the key issue.

The cost of an all-day bus ticket in Glasgow is £5.60. People who are seeking asylum rely on a financial stipend of just £7 per day to cover the cost of living. For those who are living in accommodation that provides meals, the allowance is £1.26 per day. The adult single bus fare in Glasgow is £2.95, and a child's single bus fare is £1.60, so their allowance does not even cover that cost alone. Those people are, at present, prohibited from getting a job or accessing most social security benefits. Therefore, they are the most deprived cohort of people in the country. Having to fork out £5.60 for bus travel to attend medical, social or legal appointments is, quite simply, not an option unless they go without food

or other essentials. I and many other members have heard pretty harrowing accounts of that.

Crucially, concessionary bus travel also enables people who are seeking asylum to integrate into their new home country, discover their new place of residence and begin to restart their lives. It is a socially just policy. I have stood in the chamber several times in the past three years articulating the benefits of extending free bus travel to people who are seeking asylum. We should hear from people with lived experience of the asylum system in Britain so that the Conservative members know who they are demonising when they use their Opposition day time to create division between pensioners and asylum seekers for their political convenience.

One person who is seeking asylum in Glasgow said:

“This will allow me to meet with friends, access education, and connect with the community. It will allow me to have some form of freedom. We already live in an open prison at hotels, not able to meet friends, travel, and to overcome isolation. We only receive £8.86 per week. It will help me to live a little more of a normal life.”

Another said:

“For someone seeking asylum, a free bus pass is more than a card—it’s a chance to explore, to access help, and to feel a little less invisible.”

The scheme will do so much more than provide free transport for new members of our community who are seeking sanctuary; it will begin a process of integration so that they can feel part of their new community. We must also remember that the Conservative Government spent the atrociously wasteful sum of £700 million on the failed Rwanda scheme and its members now have the audacity to come to the chamber to talk about a commonsense budget. By my calculations, the wasted funding on the Rwanda scheme would have covered free bus travel for people seeking asylum for 350 years. That is how ludicrous and risible the Tory position has ended up being.

In contrast, free bus travel for asylum seekers costs a small sum but will have a profound impact on some of the most marginalised people in Scotland, giving them access to healthcare and other vital services. The policy would equate to a 0.2 per cent increase in the number of people in Scotland benefiting from existing free concessionary travel schemes. When we started the campaign, we coined the slogan “A small change that would make a huge difference”, and we stand by that, because it is as true today as it was in December 2021. It is a rounding error in the Scottish Government budget. The costs are negligible—according to the Government’s figures, the implementation would be around £2 million a year, which is 0.003 per cent of the budget. The notion that that is unaffordable is, simply, risible.

Crucially, we are talking about people who do not wish to be here but who have been forced to flee their home country seeking safety. Free bus travel allows them a modicum of dignity as they begin to rebuild their lives.

16:15

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): As I was sitting here listening to the debate, wondering how I would start my speech, I was struck that there was a time when we had exchanges of ideas in this chamber. We did not always agree with one another, but we had exchanges of ideas and ideals, and we would negotiate to find a way forward. However, when Craig Hoy of the Conservatives stands up and says, for example, that the baby box is a pet project and that we should move away from providing bus passes for asylum seekers, we can see that we are far away from that world.

I have no idea where the Conservatives got this anti-baby policy from. I do not know what the babies of Scotland have done to the Conservatives. Possibly I may be at fault, as I have four grandchildren and, when I sit down to tell them about the future Scotland that I want, every story starts with “Never trust a Tory.” Why would anyone trust a Tory when they are sitting here attacking asylum seekers? The kind of future that I want for my grandchildren is the compassionate future where we will look at people who need help and put out a hand of friendship and try to make a difference in their lives. Those are the ideals that I have, as do most of us in this chamber.

Is this where the Tories are at now? Are we now seeing Trumpian triumphalism from the Tories as they continue to lurch to the right? The thing is, Tories will do what Tories do, and they will continue to talk Scotland down. I will continue to look to the future and put forward a positive vision for our nation.

The Scottish Government’s draft budget for 2025-26 demonstrates fiscal responsibility and a social conscience in these challenging times. It is a budget that represents not just numbers on a page but a vision of hope and opportunity for every person in Scotland. It is a budget that puts the needs and priorities of our people first, investing in their future and ensuring that Scotland continues to thrive. At its heart, the budget represents a clear commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in our society while ensuring the sustainable delivery of vital public services. The introduction of a universal winter heating payment shows our dedication to supporting those who are most affected by the cost of living crisis, particularly our elderly citizens, who should never have to choose between heating and eating.

This year's budget is clear in its purpose to deliver progress on the issues that matter most to the people of Scotland. The Scottish Government is committed to eradicating child poverty, growing our economy, improving public services such as the NHS and tackling the climate emergency. It is a bold, compassionate and forward-thinking budget—a budget for Scotland, by Scotland.

When we talk about commonsense budgeting, is that not exactly what the proposed Scottish Government budget is? Are we not here to support the people of Scotland and give them hope for the future? Is it not our place to be able to look our constituents in the eye and say, "We did the right thing"?

The Conservatives' narrative in this debate has not changed since the publication of the budget; they have just continued with the same cynical attack lines, which I find extremely disappointing. They appear to have run out of any positive ideas as they look over their shoulder to see Nigel Farage and his cronies looking to replace them.

There is another way, Presiding Officer. The other route is that we all embrace the Scottish Government's budget and its proposals. Those who plan to oppose the budget really need to ask themselves why they would they vote against a budget that has the needs of the Scottish people at its heart.

Stephen Kerr: But it does not.

George Adam: It does have people at its heart—the Scottish Government is looking to the needs of our communities in these very challenging times.

Let me be clear about the context in which the Scottish Government budget has been crafted. Despite the usual Westminster-imposed constraints, the Scottish Government has made progressive choices that reflect our values and our priorities. The Conservative motion attempts to pit vulnerable groups against each other. I and almost everyone else in the chamber seems to wholly reject that deeply cynical approach. The Conservatives are looking over their shoulder at the shadow cast by Reform UK and, in this debate, they are hastening towards their lowest-ever point.

That is not what this place is all about, it is not what it has been about since day 1 and it does not reflect our values or Scotland's values. The Conservatives continue to listen to the noises of the far right but, unfortunately, that is where they find themselves. The Tories in Scotland dance to Nigel Farage's tune. That is not common sense. It is an unacceptable jump to the right, and it is not what we are all about.

Our Scotland believes and trusts in our communities. Equally, the Scottish Government needs to work to continue to retain that trust. That partnership has worked since the SNP came to power in 2007. We will all retain that trust by looking at the options that the Scottish Government proposes in the budget.

The budget takes meaningful steps to support all vulnerable groups, including our commitment to effectively scrap the two-child benefit cap in 2026, which is a policy that will make a difference to families across Scotland. Where will Labour stand on that? Will it continue to be at the wrong end of the debate by not supporting the Scottish people and the budget?

Critics of the Scottish Government claim that it is pursuing a high-tax agenda, but let us examine the facts. Our progressive approach to taxation ensures that the majority of Scots still pay less than they would elsewhere in the UK, while generating vital additional revenue that supports our public services. That is about creating a fairer, more equal society.

The budget embodies the resilience, creativity and compassion of Scotland. It represents the future that we want for our families, our communities and our nation. Together, let us seize this moment and work towards a brighter, fairer and more prosperous Scotland.

16:22

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): What an important debate we have in the chamber today. With the budget, this SNP devolved Government has yet again let down the hard-working people of Scotland. It has let down its young people, the working population, our industry, our business owners and our investment opportunities. That is quite a record after 17 years.

This Government is out of ideas and out of policies, and it is one that I hope will soon be out of office. In the area that I represent, we have seen businesses close down, the oil and gas sector betrayed and growth recede. There is nothing in the budget to give any hope for the vital industries and jobs on which the north-east depends.

Let us look at some of the detail. The SNP Administration has announced funding for offshore wind. That looks good in a headline, but any further scrutiny leaves us wondering exactly what that money will pay for. It is capital funding, which narrows it down, and there is zero detail on where it will be spent, what it will be spent on and what difference it will make to the net zero economy. Chasing headlines is all that this lot are about.

As a party, we are eager to welcome any investment in the future of wind energy, particularly investment that will encourage production and manufacturing in this country, but there is zero detail from the Scottish Government on its net zero aim. There is no climate change plan and there is no strategy. There is an Administration that is making big promises with zero intention to deliver. It gives a whole new meaning to the term net zero. This Government will earn its title of being a net zero Government, but that will be net zero not in terms of energy, but in terms of delivery.

There is no sign of the just transition plan, and there is little mention in the budget of a just transition. That seems to have gone out the window as well. Instead, we are once again talking about a cliff edge of investment in our North Sea oil and gas sector.

We know that both Labour and SNP plans will mean tens of thousands of job losses in the north-east and that this budget will have a major negative impact on economic growth in the north-east. People in our towns and communities, our families and hard-working Scots will see their pay packets penalised simply for living and working in Scotland.

The just transition fund was meant to provide £500 million over 10 years. It is now three years in and where are we on that? It has been given just £15.9 million in this year's budget. The Government is so far behind in its commitment to a just transition that it is becoming abundantly clear that that was simply a fake promise to begin with. The Government is net zero by name, net zero in action.

Furthermore, we are continuing to make it increasingly difficult for our working rural population to travel to and from work, due to delayed road schemes and a failing rail network. There is nothing in the budget for the A96 improvement or north-east rail improvements. The Government has promised, time and time again, to do something about our roads in the north-east, whether it is the A9 or the A96, yet progress has been continually delayed, stopped and put back with cries of "It wisnae me" resonating around. The north-east has had enough. We want to see action on those dangerous roads. The Government must stop passing the buck and take action. The price to be paid if it does not is too high—more accidents and more deaths. It is no longer acceptable, and it never was, to push the issue into the long grass. We need action now.

This net zero Government also promised £200 million for rail improvements in the north-east by 2026, yet only £8 million has been spent. Why? There has been more buck passing and more obfuscation. That is another broken promise. Our

rural communities are sick and tired of warm words and empty promises. The Government is out of ideas, out of policy and out of time.

In closing, I will talk about the businesses in central Aberdeen. I confess that there is not much Christmas cheer among some of the business owners who I have been speaking to. They are facing the triple whammy of a low-emission zone that is impacting their businesses, bus gates that are preventing access to their businesses, and business rates that are sucking the life out of their profits and their ability to continue in business. The Scottish Conservatives are pleading with the cabinet secretary to pass on the business rates exemption to pubs and restaurants, to mitigate that triple blow. It is immoral that the SNP Government received £145 million in Barnett consequential for that but is passing on only a fraction of it. This budget will sound the death knell for many of our local pubs, favourite restaurants, important industries and valued projects.

We cannot risk the loss of vital resources in our communities, and the budget puts the very heart of our communities at risk. It is a net zero Government for sure—it is killing our industry and entrepreneurship, it is devastating our oil and gas sector, it is an enemy of road development and improvement, and it is against improving our rail network. It is an absolute disgrace. It is out of ideas, out of policy and out of time.

16:27

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Presiding Officer. I remind Mr Lumsden that the Parliament is here to consider how to spend money and not just to copy what they do at Westminster.

I thank the Conservatives for showing us something of their true colours in the motion. First, they emphasise tax and taxpayers as if tax is a bad thing. They claim that Scotland has high taxes, whereas, in fact, we know that both the UK and Scotland have relatively low taxes in comparison with many other European countries. It is because taxes are too low that we are having to choose between winter heating payments for pensioners and bus travel for asylum seekers. We should be able to provide both. It is a choice for all the parties here: do we want decent public services, which are paid for by higher taxes, or do we want a country with poor roads, a shortage of houses and long NHS waiting times because our taxes are too low? It is quite a simple question really.

Douglas Lumsden: I am confused by what Mr Mason is saying, because we have higher taxes and our roads are crumbling. Does he not accept that we have all those things?

John Mason: No, I do not accept that, because other countries with better public services, such as Denmark, have much higher taxes and are much more successful.

The Conservatives once again seek to link higher taxes with a lack of economic growth, yet their own experience in government at Westminster has shown that there has often been very poor growth at the same time as low taxes. The two need not be linked.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member give way?

John Mason: No. I am not giving way again just now.

I welcome growth in the economy, but the question arises of who benefits from it. Taxes are at least part of the answer to that question. If taxes are kept low, a few lucky people get richer and richer while other, hard-working people who are in low-paid jobs and do not own their own homes do not benefit from that growth.

In my opinion, freezing council tax last year was a mistake and, if local councils now decide on more substantial increases in council tax in the coming year, we cannot blame them for that. We have protected NHS funding in recent years, with the result that local government has faced a real squeeze. I question how much longer we should protect NHS funding in that way and automatically pass on all Barnett consequential to the NHS. There is broad agreement that we should do more on preventative spending, and that probably means giving more to local councils, which are often very active in that space.

While I am on the subject of local councils, I point out that we need to replace council tax. No time is ideal for that, and any new system will see losers complaining loudly while winners potentially remain largely silent. However, as every year goes past, the council tax system becomes less fair. I would argue that poorer areas such as the east end of Glasgow, which have lower property values that rise more slowly, are losing out while areas with more costly homes are the relative winners.

I am particularly pleased that affordable housing features strongly in the budget and that spending is to be restored or reinstated to previous levels. However, we are in a housing emergency, which might suggest that we should go beyond just restoring or reinstating. I accept the point that was made after the budget statement last week, that there might not be capacity in the construction sector to immediately increase house building substantially. However, if the word “emergency” means anything at all, I presume that it means that housing is now a higher priority relative to other sectors. Although road improvements are important, I do not believe that we are facing a

roads emergency. Therefore, I would like more to be spent on housing and less on roads.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission tells us that, for 2025-26, resource funding is up by only 0.8 per cent on 2024-25 in real terms, so there is no huge pot of gold available. Labour may tell us that it is the highest block grant ever but, obviously, the pound is worth less every year, so it would be very strange if the grant was not at the highest level so far.

On spending priorities, I welcome the increase for social security, which is up from 9.7 per cent of the budget to 13.5 per cent, but I am not clear why mitigating the two-child limit was preferred over increasing the Scottish child payment. I presume that the latter would have been less hassle, would have had no administration costs and would not have required co-operation at Westminster.

The Tories sink to new depths by opposing support for asylum seekers. The Tories say that they support the hospitality sector when that means talking about profitable businesses having their rates cut and making extra profit. I wonder whether they have recently looked at the definition of “hospitality”. The Cambridge dictionary tells us that it means

“the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors”.

How does that fit with refusing help to asylum seekers, who often live on a pittance and cannot afford to travel even within Glasgow? I have a friend who had to step over dead bodies in the street outside his home when escaping from his country—are we saying that we cannot pay his bus fare?

Finally, we need to accept that the fiscal framework is broken and needs to be completely rewritten. We cannot compete with London and the south-east of England, although we can compete with other parts of the UK. Secondly, the Barnett formula is gradually cutting our spending year by year, so Scotland is in a lose-lose situation in relation to the rest of the UK. I accept that the cabinet secretary told us last year that a fundamental rewriting was not on the table, and that is not her fault. However, we should at least accept that the fiscal framework is weighted against Scotland and that, other things being equal, it ensures that Scotland loses out as each year goes by.

In my relatively new independent status, I will support the SNP Government budget when we get to voting on it. However, that will not prevent me from commenting on various points. On today’s Conservative motion, I hope that we can all agree that it is cruel and only panders to the Reform UK agenda.

16:33

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): As inherently comfortable as I am when my party puts forward a budget that the Conservatives describe as disastrous, I cannot help but feel, when listening to the debate today, that that is what they would say regardless of what was in the budget document. The messaging from Conservatives lately is all over the place—they are desperate to criticise anyone and everyone else. This afternoon alone, we have had Tory MSPs shout at the cabinet secretary for our social security spending and at Michael Marra for Labour's social security cuts.

Tim Eagle wants more rural spending and Sandesh Gulhane wants more for the NHS. I ask them, "With whose taxes?", because they are also arguing for less taxation for those with the most money. They want more spending but with less money available to spend.

The Tories' leader is othering people who are seeking asylum, arguing for the money to go to pensioners instead. I have news for the Tories—that is social security spending. They need to pick an ideology. The Conservatives are clearly in search of a policy base and, for some reason, today they have picked Nigel Farage's.

We should always go back to the facts, such as that we are in a cost of living crisis. It would be concerning to me if the Scottish social security budget were not large. It should not matter whether someone is a child, a pensioner or any other age—we should be preventing them from falling into poverty whenever we reasonably can.

Fifty per cent of taxpayers in Scotland pay less than they would in England. We are asking those with the broadest shoulders to help us to eradicate child poverty and to fund the NHS. That is a consistent and moral stance. The Conservatives are free to disagree with it, but they should at least be honest about why and about where they suggest that we find the £1.7 billion that we have because we did not follow UK policy on taxes.

As for economic growth, the richest getting richer will not help the communities that we represent. When people have little income, they spend that money—often locally—and they do not hoard it. Therefore, I am unapologetic about the position of taxing wealth and making sure that other people can feed their kids.

I support efforts such as expanding the free bus travel scheme to people seeking asylum and supporting young islanders with free interisland ferry travel, which gives them opportunities that they might not otherwise have to take up one of the many vacancies in Shetland, Lewis or another of our precious island communities. Those

communities need more people who can be economically active.

There is a more sinister aspect to the debate that I will not ignore. People seeking asylum, who could also be economically active if the Conservatives had acted with a shred of decency when they were in Whitehall, deserve better from their representatives than the Tories suggesting to pensioners that those people are taking their benefits. If MSPs want to finally talk about giving those people enough money to live on, the right to work or decent lodgings, I am happy to get into that conversation, but it is disgraceful to ensure poverty in law for a marginalised group and then criticise the Government when it has to step in to ensure that those people can access immigration advice, healthcare and, where possible, work by helping them to get on the bus.

Paul Sweeney: Emma Roddick makes a powerful point. Does she recognise that the people who genuinely profit out of the asylum system are the large private contractors, such as Serco and Mears, which often get very lucrative housing contracts from the Government?

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. Not only have recent immigration policies been punitive for the people whom we should be supporting, but they do not make economic sense. I hope that Paul Sweeney's party will consider making huge changes to much of the legislation on immigration that was brought in under the previous Government.

Such measures to help people seeking asylum might not be necessary if successive UK Governments had not spent so much time and energy doing exactly what the Scottish Conservatives are doing today, which is creating a hostile environment towards people who are exercising a basic human right to seek refuge in Scotland.

I always flinch when I hear the words "common sense", because when the Tories say them, they mean people agreeing with them. That is neither sensible nor, according to recent polling, common. The cabinet secretary and many members from all parties have been correct to call out the dog whistles in the Conservative motion. When I was young, I used to watch business in the chamber and feel very proud that members of every party—even those that I would never consider joining—had respect for one another and for those whom they represented. When schoolkids take part in the Donald Dewar debating tournament, they get to see clips of parties in this place disagreeing respectfully and showing empathy for people in communities across Scotland. Any young people watching today will see the Scottish Conservatives othering some of the most marginalised people in society for political gain.

Even the Conservatives know that it is nonsense, because they do not have a list of 6,600 pensioners whom they think should get a share of £2 million, when it would cost more than £100 million to pay all of them. They have no plan for redistributing that money in any fair way, because there is not one. They are simply and shamefully using refugees as pawns to play up to the voters whom they are losing to the far right, instead of doing what any decent representative would do and standing against and apart from those dangerous ideas.

We all have a duty to protect people in this country from fascism, to act with basic humanity and to inspire and motivate people through leadership. Fair play to Labour for clearly and unequivocally condemning the language in the motion and for showing that leadership and humanity. How the Tories can fail to do so is beyond me, and I hope that they get the reckoning for it that they deserve in 2026. Much of the world is incredibly unsafe right now; we have to do better than this.

The Scottish Government has made some excellent decisions in its budget. The UK Government could make lives easier by working with us instead of against us. I hope that the other parties in the chamber will support a set of proposals that could do so much for Scotland and which is opposed so strongly by the party that has brought such a disgraceful motion to our Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Ross Greer to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens. You have up to six minutes, Mr Greer.

16:40

Ross Greer: It was remiss of me not to apologise at the start of the debate for being a few moments late; I had missed that business was running ahead of time.

I will start with a point of frustration at the Government's recent decision to drop its commitment to introduce an infrastructure levy in Scotland. The power to introduce that levy is time limited and will expire in 2026 unless the regulations are introduced. I think that it is right—and the Parliament agreed last session that it is right—that developers should contribute to the creation of communities. That requires infrastructure. Quite rightly, the Government is committed to people being able to live in an area where the day-to-day services that they need are within 15 minutes of their home. However, we cannot achieve that without funding for that infrastructure.

That being said, I welcome the Scottish Government's overall—

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention on that specific point?

Ross Greer: I welcome an intervention.

Ivan McKee: It is an important point. We carefully considered an infrastructure levy and talked to many stakeholders about it, but we recognised that section 75 contributions, which raise far more than would ever be raised through an infrastructure levy, are the best vehicle for directing funding to the issues that Ross Greer identified. We continue to work with stakeholders to maximise the use of section 75 as the most efficient delivery mechanism for raising and delivering that funding.

Ross Greer: I am grateful for the intervention, but section 75 orders are not working, which is why, in the previous parliamentary session, the Parliament agreed to introduce an infrastructure levy. However, I will happily engage with the minister in more detail on some of the issues around that.

I welcome the engagement of the minister and the cabinet secretary on the budget. There has been a clear effort to meet the Greens' red lines on climate and nature spending—the sum of £4.9 billion that we are running through the detail of at the moment—and on a real-terms increase to council funding. Those are in addition to policies that I mentioned previously, such as the increase to the additional dwelling supplement, free ferry travel for young islanders and, yes, free bus travel for those seeking asylum, as well as cross-party proposals to restore the winter fuel payment. I look forward to further discussions around areas that the Greens would prioritise, such as the expansion of free school meals, the bus fare cap and restoring the cut to the nature restoration fund. The public expect compromise, and they expect Parliament to agree a budget. The Greens are willing to engage in that discussion, and we appreciate the efforts that the Scottish Government has made so far.

I will touch on a few points from the debate. Craig Hoy and Murdo Fraser had a lot to say about social security. Craig Hoy described the adult disability payment as “soft touch” and Murdo Fraser talked about needing to get

“people off welfare and into work.”

However, we know from huge amounts of experience that the way that we support people into work is not by taking away the limited support that they already have but by giving them the additional support that they need. I point out to the Conservatives—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: Absolutely not.

I point out to the Conservatives the evidence of excess deaths as a result of Tory austerity. The British Medical Association estimates that 190,000 people died in the UK as a result of Conservative austerity, while the Glasgow Centre for Population Health's estimate is as high as 330,000. That is the result of a punitive approach to the most vulnerable and those who rely on our social security system in particular.

Tim Eagle mentioned cuts to NatureScot's budget, which is something that I am also concerned about. However, I find that hard to square with the Conservatives' proposal to merge—therefore, saving money—environmental agencies such as NatureScot and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Has that proposal been run by NatureScot staff at the Inverness headquarters in Tim Eagle's region or Murdo Fraser's constituents who work at SEPA's HQ in Stirling? As Emma Roddick pointed out, it is hard to square the Conservatives' demanding more money with their proposals for cuts in those areas.

Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned a range of proposals that the Liberal Democrats made, which appeared in the draft budget, and I want to credit them for that. The Greens and the Liberal Democrats have demonstrated the impact that Opposition parties can have when they engage constructively as part of the budget process. Our constituents want us to have an impact on their lives far more than they want us to secure party-political advantage over one another at the next election.

The public want value for money. We can always do better on that. We can always spend better. The First Minister challenged all the parties to face up to difficult choices. I put that challenge back to the First Minister in relation to the small business bonus scheme, in particular. Given that the Government's own review found no evidence of positive economic outcomes from it, I wonder whether it is really good value for a quarter of a billion pounds a year.

Overall, when it comes to public service reform, progressives need a better story to tell. We cannot concede that ground to the right, which simply wants to shrink the state.

Liz Smith made a fair challenge—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way on the small business bonus scheme?

Ross Greer: I am afraid not; I will have to start winding up in a minute.

Liz Smith made a fair challenge on the sustainability of our public finances. On that, we agree: they are not sustainable at the moment. She will know that the Greens do not lack solutions when it comes to increasing the revenue required to fund public services. We would start by replacing the comically outdated council tax and introducing a public health levy on supermarkets that make large profits selling cheap alcohol and tobacco.

Like other colleagues, I congratulate the Labour Party on the first line of its amendment: the unequivocal condemnation of the Conservatives' attempt to turn vulnerable groups against one another. It was right that Alex Rowley and Michael Marra read into the record the comments that were made by the Catholic church and the Church of Scotland today, in the season of Advent, when we welcome the Christ child—an outsider and a refugee—into the world.

I agree with Michelle Thomson on the need for borrowing powers to invest. John Mason and I regularly agree on issues of public finance; it was no different in relation to the comments that he made today about the housing emergency and the need to reprioritise money for it, perhaps away from road spending. I think that any outcome-based budgeting process would result in that conclusion.

The Parliament is expected to show leadership in society and, as Paul Sweeney said, not to punch down. We are expected to bring society together; we have seen elsewhere what happens when societies are divided by opportunistic politicians.

We will negotiate over the budget. That is normal. I am sure that we will gain advantage for our parties through that process. That is normal. However, we can never allow it to become normal in this Parliament to pit the most vulnerable groups in our society against one another, and I am proud that the vast majority of MSPs will reject attempts to do that. I urge my Conservative colleagues who have sat through the debate in great discomfort to show the courage of their convictions and join us in rejecting the motion.

16:47

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is quite difficult to know how to sum up this debate properly, but it gives me great pleasure to follow Ross Greer, because he made an important contribution, as did Alex Cole-Hamilton, Alex Rowley, the cabinet secretary and my colleague Michael Marra.

It is important to note what is wrong with the motion. It is not right to pit one vulnerable group

against another, and I am glad that churches came together to call that out.

I am trying to articulate what I am saying in a normal tone, because it would be easy to be hyperbolic, which I really do not want to be. One of the secrets in this Parliament—I think that we all know this secret—is that, as there are only 129 of us, we all know one another and we probably get on a lot better individually than we probably care to let on. When we get into this big room, it is probably a bit easier to have a knockabout and have big arguments, and we hope that no one notices who we talk to in the tea rooms and on our way down the corridors.

I say earnestly that I have a number of friends across the chamber, including Conservative members, although I will not embarrass them by naming them. I know that this is not you. I know that you do not really think that scrapping bus passes for refugees would raise the revenue that would be needed for all the rest of the measures in your motion. I know that you do not agree with a politics that seeks to other a group.

In some ways, the real disservice of the policy is that it probably does not go far enough. Refugees are incredibly vulnerable and exist in really difficult circumstances, and I worry that we will think that the issue is done if we just have a budget measure that provides bus passes for refugees. That is the real problem with the policy.

Stephen Kerr: Daniel Johnson is going on at great length about bus passes for refugees and asylum seekers. If he is so in favour of that measure and thinks that it is a moral right, with those of us who oppose it being moral degenerates, why has his Labour Government at Westminster not introduced a similar measure in England? In fact, it has said that it will not introduce such a measure.

Daniel Johnson: Let us debate what refugees might or might not need, but let us not use language such as “condemns”, which is what the motion says. It is genuinely telling how few Conservative members were willing to speak to the very precise recommendation in the motion. You all sidestepped it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We always need to speak through the chair, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I apologise, Deputy Presiding Officer.

We are at a real fork in the road in Scottish politics. We have all seen the results of the council by-elections. We have seen Reform increase its share of the vote. I understand the position that that puts us all in, because we all know the ease with which populism can come, but let us be clear that that is what Reform represents—it is populist

politics. It is about easy appeals to casual prejudice and false oppositionalism—creating oppositions within society.

We really must reject that because, apart from anything else, there is a place for Conservative politics in Scottish politics. I do not agree with it, but some of the traditional Conservative values such as traditionalism, caution when it comes to public policy and being socially conservative have a role. I have spent most of my adult life thinking that Conservative politics is just a bit boring and too tame and does not go far enough, but I am genuinely trying to make a personal point. The Conservative Party is at risk of going down a populist route, which is very dangerous.

Emma Roddick was absolutely right. We all know what “common sense” is code for—it is about populism; it is not really common sense. It is about politics that relies only on the inherent prejudices that exist in society, without backing it up with policy, data or reason.

There was a debate that we could and should have had about what the budget does not do, or what it does do, and about the approach that it takes. I very much enjoyed listening to Liz Smith—she made a very important contribution. We have to think about how policy joins up. It is not good enough to talk just about the benefits of social security policy; we need to talk about how it has a wider economic benefit. Likewise, I very much enjoyed Kenny Gibson’s speech. If I can have one brief moment of levity, I was amused by his condemnation of grandstanding. I know that he would never indulge in that himself.

In terms of dealing with strategic issues, the budget lies somewhere on the spectrum between the land of milk and honey and utter disaster. We have to listen to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. We face serious challenges with demography, with the level of investment that we have and with infrastructure—even on the points about roads that Douglas Lumsden mentioned. So much of what is distinctive about Scotland relies on that sort of infrastructure. Again, such a presentation of politics—to say that we are either for roads or against roads—is really unhelpful.

We did not have a debate about those issues. We did not have the debate that we could have had, although we need to have such a debate as part of the regular budget process. It is not enough just to have questions about a statement when the budget is first published. We should be talking about it much more in the round. We had the opportunity to do that today, but we did not do it because of the line in the Conservative motion that condemns bus travel for asylum seekers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson, could you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Daniel Johnson: I will. We should all think about that.

16:53

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I start where Daniel Johnson left off. The tone that he set is absolutely appropriate to the situation that we find ourselves in when debating the Tory motion. I pay tribute to the contributions of Michael Marra, who addressed the issue head on, and of Paul Sweeney, who talked eloquently about the importance of the measure to provide free bus travel for asylum seekers that is included in our budget.

Sadly, all this points to the further demise of the Tory party. We had some breaking news this afternoon. At half past two, Bloomberg broke the story that the Tories and Reform are already in talks about electoral pacts. Discussions are focused on the idea that local Conservative associations could stand down candidates in some districts to give Reform, led by Nigel Farage, a better chance of winning seats. Unfortunately, that is the reality that we find ourselves in. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the minister. Please continue, Mr McKee.

Ivan McKee: Thank you, Presiding Officer—we are debating important matters.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made valuable points about the economic and social value of the free bus passes. It is important to recognise that, in study after study, data has shown that the economic value of immigrants to society is very significant. If the Tories are serious about economic growth, they should recognise that immigrant communities and asylum seekers add considerable economic value to our society.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The minister's remarks about the social value of giving asylum seekers free bus passes speak to the very heart of the debate and to the inequity and the shrivelled moral bankruptcy of the Conservative Party as it tries to pit one very vulnerable social group against another.

Stephen Kerr: Absolutely ridiculous.

The Presiding Officer: I ask members to resist any temptation to contribute when they have not been called to speak.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The Conservatives seem to suggest pitting one vulnerable group against another and to suggest that we can maximise the economic benefit to one very vulnerable group by stripping from another the very limited benefits that we offer it, as though that is somehow an answer or a way forward. The Conservatives have not

listened to the church or to parties across this chamber railing against that inequity and moral bankruptcy. I am ashamed of many of my Conservative parliamentary colleagues, many of whom know better.

Ivan McKee: Again, Alex Cole-Hamilton has made his point well. The Tories are not only morally bankrupt but economically illiterate, and we have seen that in the two letters from Russell Findlay, the first of which asked for £1 billion in tax cuts and—after he realised that he would have to figure out how he was going to pay for that—the second of which came out with £50 million in spending reductions in the best case, as Kenny Gibson has detailed. In addition, we have had another long list of spending asks from Conservative members. George Adam made the point very well when he asked what babies have ever done to the Tories.

Craig Hoy: The minister is on record as saying that further tax rises in Scotland would be counterproductive. Why?

Ivan McKee: It is absolutely critical that we get the balance right, and I think that we have done that in the budget that we have put forward. The problem that the Conservatives have is that they do not understand that we are a Government that continues to balance its budget year after year, despite the great uncertainties of the— *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Ivan McKee: Do you want to intervene? *[Interruption.]* We do balance our budget—we balance our budget every year. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I know that you know that only one member should be speaking at any time, and that will be the member whom the Presiding Officer has called. I do not recall calling you, Mr Kerr.

Ivan McKee: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I know that the Tories do not want to hear this—

Liz Smith: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: Indeed.

Liz Smith: Does the minister recognise that balancing the budget is a legal requirement and is not a matter of choice for the Scottish Government? It is a legal requirement, is it not?

Ivan McKee: The fact that it is a legal requirement does not make it any easier, and this Government does it year after year, which demonstrates that we are in control of the finances.

We understand the need for a balance between taxes and spending, and we make sure that they

balance every year. *[Interruption.]* The fact that Conservative members are laughing shows that they clearly do not understand how the fiscal realities work.

Scotland's economy has higher long-term growth. Over the 17 years since this Government came to power, we have had double the rate of productivity growth compared with the rest of the UK. We have lower unemployment and higher average wages. For the past nine years, we have had the best performance on foreign direct investment across the UK, outside of London. That has been delivered by Scottish Development International, the international offices of which the Tories want to cut.

While the Tories are focused on ridiculous soundbites, the Scottish Government is focused on sound investments and making sure that we have an international footprint that can deliver foreign direct investment to create jobs and wealth and grow Scotland's economy.

Ross Greer: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: The minister must conclude.

Ivan McKee: Douglas Lumsden cannot bring himself to welcome the £150 million investment in offshore wind. Tim Eagle does not recognise the £22 million increase in the rural budget. NFU Scotland recognises that; its main ask was to secure the £46 million of capital spend. It thanks us for that, and it looks forward to working with the Scottish Government to deliver on that.

We are serious about public service reform. We are working hard to deliver on that, and we have realised significant savings as a consequence of the work that has been done so far.

The Government has its priorities: reducing child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and providing high-quality and sustainable public services. We will continue to focus on them while, unfortunately, the Tory party in Scotland is busy being sidetracked down a cul-de-sac as it tries to do a deal with Reform UK, which the people of Scotland will not thank it for.

17:00

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We are one week on from the publication of the Scottish Government's budget. This afternoon has been the first real opportunity to properly scrutinise what is in it and to cut through the spin. Scrutiny is exactly what we have heard from my colleagues on the benches behind me, in contrast to the

sanctimonious claptrap that we have heard from members on some of the other benches.

As sure as night follows day, the SNP will always complain about any budget settlement that it gets from the UK Government. This year, it surely had less cause to complain than ever before, because the block grant for the coming year is the highest that it has been in the history of devolution—in real terms, it is double what it was when devolution commenced 25 years ago. The uplift for next year is £3.4 billion—a record increase. I have real issues with how the Labour Government has raised the money to provide that increase, but it is a fact that the Scottish Government will have more money in the coming year than it has ever had before.

Despite that unprecedented sum of money, all we see around us are deteriorating public services. Our NHS is in crisis: fewer patients are being treated than before Covid-19, and waiting lists are longer than ever before. We have only to look at the Auditor General's report and the criticisms that he made of the lack of reform in the NHS to see that that money is simply not being properly spent, as Sandesh Gulhane said earlier.

Michelle Thomson: As one of my colleagues commented, the member makes the same speech every year about the record sums of money that are coming to the Scottish Government. When did he last sit down to work out the cumulative effect of inflation and compare the Scottish Government's budget against it? It is as though he is living in isolation.

Murdo Fraser: I am really surprised that Michelle Thomson, who is a very experienced parliamentarian, does not understand what "in real terms" means. The Scottish Government's budget has nearly doubled in real terms since devolution was established.

Of course, the block grant is only one component of the overall budget. The other determining factor is the receipts from the devolved taxes—principally from income tax—and those are lower than they should be. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the SNP's failure to grow our economy over the past year has cost the Scottish budget a staggering £634 million. Had we seen economic growth and wages match those of the rest of the UK, we would have had that money to spend on public services. That is why we make no apology for saying that our focus needs to be on growing the economy to at least match the level of average UK growth.

John Mason: Does the member accept that virtually no region of Europe can compete with London and the south-east and that the fiscal framework is broken in that respect?

Murdo Fraser: I know that Mr Mason is no longer in the SNP, but it was his Government and Mr Swinney, when he was finance secretary, who negotiated the fiscal framework at the time. If Mr Mason has a problem with that, he should take it up with the SNP lot and not with us.

The SNP will argue that, in this budget, it is cutting taxes for the lowest paid. As we have heard from Craig Hoy, that generous tax cut amounts to the grand sum of £12 a year—£1 a month—which is less than the cost of a first-class stamp. That is not enough throughout the year even to send a dozen Christmas cards to friends and family.

Shona Robison: Murdo Fraser is not mentioning the fact that those in the lowest half of income distribution will be better off by more than £450 a year when taking tax and social security together, which is surely something that he would welcome.

Murdo Fraser: Well, Presiding Officer, the finance secretary has not been paying attention to what has been happening with councils across Scotland setting their council tax for the coming year. On the very same day that she was making her statement to Parliament last week, Perth and Kinross Council, in my region—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: Perth and Kinross Council agreed council tax increases of 10 per cent next year, 10 per cent the following year and 6 per cent the following year—a cumulative uplift of 28 per cent in the coming years. Other councils are talking about even higher council tax increases. Those eye-watering increases will not even fund better services, because the councils that are having to take those decisions are the same councils that are closing libraries, shutting down public toilets, reducing teacher numbers and spending less on parks and verge maintenance, along with a host of other cost-cutting measures. People are paying much more and getting less in return.

Nor was there real help for business in the budget. For the past two years the UK Conservative Government gave retail, hospitality and leisure businesses 75 per cent rates relief—a choice that the SNP has not taken, despite having the Barnett consequential to fund it. Instead, Shona Robison announced 40 per cent rates relief for the coming year, but not for retail, hospitality and leisure—only for hospitality and only for businesses with a rateable value of up to £51,000, which excludes more than 2,000 licensed premises above the cut-off point.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: I am sorry, but I have taken a number of interventions and I am going to run out of time.

Allan Henderson, the owner of Aberdeen's McGinty's Group, said that the sector had been "completely shafted" by the policy. Paul Waterson of the Scottish Licensed Trade Association warned that larger licensed premises were wondering whether they could now survive. As both Craig Hoy and Douglas Lumsden reminded us, the finance secretary had £145 million in Barnett consequential from the policy. How much of that did she pass on? She passed on £22 million—less than one fifth of the sum available to her. Even if she could do it for only one year, what a boost that would be to struggling hospitality businesses.

The anger does not stop there. Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care could not have been more outspoken in his response to the budget when he said:

"This is a budget that kills. It will kill any reassurance that the Scottish Government truly values social care, and it will kill essential community services which are forced to close and leave workers without employment. But ultimately, it will kill people."

Where has all the money gone? Certainly, public sector workers have had above-inflation pay rises without any expectation of increased productivity. There has been substantial growth in the welfare budget—it is up £800 million—with the Scottish Fiscal Commission calculating that Scotland now pays out £1.3 billion more in benefits than it did prior to the devolution of welfare. That is before the additional cost of scrapping the two-child benefit cap, should that ever come in.

We as a nation cannot go on paying out more and more in welfare payments. We have to get people off welfare and into work. There are far too many people of working age claiming benefits who should be contributing to the economy. That is why we are unapologetic in saying that we want the overall welfare budget to be reduced.

Our alternative approach, as Scottish Conservatives, would give more support to Scottish pensioners, with winter fuel payments; more support for hard-working families, with cuts in income tax; and more support for struggling Scottish hospitality businesses, with 40 per cent rates relief for retail, leisure and hospitality and specific 100 per cent rates relief for hospitality for the coming year, recognising the serious pressures that are affecting that industry.

I was intrigued to see last week the Deputy First Minister, who is not in the chamber for the debate but has the economy in her brief—[*Interruption.*]

Oh, she is here now—I welcome her. I was intrigued to see her telling a business breakfast

that it was up to the Opposition in this Parliament to push for a more business-friendly budget. I might have thought that that was her job in government, but we are very happy to assist. That is why today we are proposing real support for business, real support for households and real support for pensioners. That is what is covered in our motion, and I commend it to Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on delivering a commonsense budget for Scotland.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S56M-15808, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I call Jamie Hepburn to move the motion.

17:09

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn):

In moving the motion, I draw members' attention to what is presently scheduled for Thursday 9 January. The motion says that we plan to hold the stage 1 debate on the Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill on that date, but I have spoken to Jeremy Balfour—the bill is in his name—and he has expressed a preference for another date. I will seek to resolve that in due course. I flag that for the Parliament's attention and to let Mr Balfour know that the matter is in hand.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 17 December 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business Wednesday 18 December 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
Health and Social Care

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Education (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Education (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 December 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am	General Questions	<i>Motion agreed to.</i>
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions	
12.45 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice	
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
1.10 pm	Decision Time	
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business	
Tuesday 7 January 2025		
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection	
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)	
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business	
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements	
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions	
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
5.00 pm	Decision Time	
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business Wednesday 8 January 2025	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs	
<i>followed by</i>	Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: National Performance	
Framework - Review of National Outcomes		
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions	
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)	
5.00 pm	Decision Time	
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business	
Thursday 9 January 2025		
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
11.40 am	General Questions	
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions	
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business	
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills	
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill	
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions	
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions	
5.00 pm	Decision Time	

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 16 December 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-15809, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask Jamie Hepburn to move the motion on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Support (Improvement) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

17:11

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

This SSI will unfairly disadvantage small herd farmers and crofters, especially those who are farming on islands and poorer land. It imposes a calving interval conditionality of 410 days on support from the suckler beef support scheme. Under the new policy, a calf must either be the first offspring of a cow or be born no later than 410 days since its mother gave birth the last time. That interval will decrease over time.

The Scottish Crofting Federation told us that many crofters cannot control that interval. It quotes one of its island members who, only recently, had organised to take delivery of a bull under the Scottish Government scheme on 15 August. Due to weather conditions, delivery was delayed to 4 September. Ferries can be cancelled and there are restrictions on the weather conditions when animals can travel, for welfare reasons. Ferry cancellations also need to be rebooked. A crofter has no control over that. In that case, the crofter was already 21 days behind schedule to receive the bull, and because of that it could be up to 50 days before all their cows were pregnant. A delay of that kind can also have a knock-on impact on other small herds that may be waiting to lease the same bull. It seems wrong that delays in the Scottish Government providing a lease bull could cost a small farmer or crofter dearly.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I agree with what Rhoda Grant said, and I thank her for bringing the issue up. It would be fair to say—I do not know whether she agrees with me—that it is not just one or two groups in the industry that are worried about this; quite a lot are, and it will have a significant impact. Does she agree that the “Suckler Beef Climate Scheme” report, which was published in 2020, is probably a better way of delivering for the Scottish beef industry?

Rhoda Grant: I agree that there has to be a better way than this.

Others have asked for a derogation for small herds, but that is not provided for in the

instrument. The derogation is not only important for the sustainability of farming on poorer land and islands financially but important for nature. Previous schemes that restricted cattle from the land showed that doing so was damaging to nature. We have now learned from those experiences how important cattle are to biodiversity and to fostering healthy environments. Sadly, a policy that is designed to cut greenhouse gas emissions could have a counterproductive impact on the natural environment.

Due to proportionality, it could take only one missed payment to make a small farmer or crofter’s business uneconomical and for them to give up rearing cattle altogether. Once cattle are lost from our hills and islands, it is difficult to return them, due to the cost of restocking. Therefore, if we get it wrong, there is no way back. I ask that the minister therefore withdraws the SSI and resubmits it with a derogation for small herds.

17:14

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity

(Jim Fairlie): This policy intervention demonstrates that the Government and the industry have engaged and collaborated to identify workable solutions to the challenges that we face. The regulations will demonstrate to consumers that the sector is taking its responsibilities seriously and is actively looking to reduce its carbon emissions by adopting interventions under cross-compliance to protect peatlands and wetlands and to improve the efficiency of the national suckler herd. The policy intervention demonstrates that the Government is actively looking at how we achieve our climate ambitions, and how we match the ambitions of our livestock sector by supporting suckler producers with direct coupled support to ensure that we maintain and improve our critical mass of home-bred beef.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I totally agree with Rhoda Grant’s comments, not just about crofters but about small producers in the Borders, for example, who have been in touch with me. The suckler herd is contracting and we need to protect that herd so that we have food security for the future. More importantly, do you not think that this is too much about net zero and not enough about welfare and the welfare of farmers?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

Jim Fairlie: I will cover the points that Rachael Hamilton has raised, but first I will continue with what I was saying.

Our approach to how we will protect suckler beef producers is in stark contrast to that of the UK Government, which is fast-tracking to end

meaningful direct support to English farmers and livestock producers, who have no coupled support.

Other states are looking at methane and carbon taxes to reduce emissions. That is the context in which the regulations are being brought in.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Can the minister reassure me that the force majeure measures in the SSI can be activated by crofters and small producers in extenuating circumstances and that the Government will clearly communicate in writing how they can activate those measures?

Jim Fairlie: Ariane Burgess is stealing my thunder. If she gives me a couple of seconds, I will come to that in my speech.

In contrast, we are working in partnership with our farmers and our crofters to support reductions in emissions, and these measures are the first step in that journey.

I have heard—and I have a great deal of sympathy with—the position that Rhoda Grant has put to me, which is that smaller producers or crofters may be more impacted than the bigger producers. I assure all members, particularly those who represent crofting communities, that we will ensure that robust force majeure measures are in place, recognising the unique challenges that crofters face.

The Government will review any impacts and, if issues emerge, we will work with officials and industry representatives to build in the changes to the Scottish suckler beef support scheme to underpin the support of cows on crofts and in small herds.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): A report by Quality Meat Scotland highlights that the continuation of existing trends will result in a 5.6 per cent reduction in the number of Scottish-born animals—it works out at 20,500 over the next six years. A growing UK population and a downward trend in beef production mean that the UK could require a 74 per cent increase in net imports. A smaller beef sector would have a significant impact on the rural economy, with annual output falling by £72 million and the number of jobs sustained in a rural area falling by more than 1,000. Did the minister consider the impact of the introduction of this conditionality on the size of the Scottish beef herd and the resulting impact on the rural economy?

The Presiding Officer: In conclusion, minister.

Jim Fairlie: The policy has been in place for a number of years, and it has been shown to slow down the decline in suckler cow numbers. I am actively looking at ways not only to stabilise those numbers but to reverse the decline, because I care deeply about the future of our farming and

crofting communities. These changes strike the right balance between continuing support of the industry and making progress to reduce emissions.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The point about herd size is critical not just at a national level but in areas such as Orkney, where we have seen that reduction in numbers—and the knock-on consequences that it can have—up and down the supply chain. Irrespective of the outcome of the vote this evening, will the minister agree to meet with the number of members here who have an interest in the issue to identify ways in which that herd size trend can be reversed so that we see the upward trend in the numbers that we desperately need to see?

The Presiding Officer: Minister—you must conclude at this point.

Jim Fairlie: I will always be more than open to having any discussions, but I will not get into too much detail on the size of the herd—I am going to move on.

As a Government, we would be doing a disservice to the livestock sector if we pretended that doing nothing was an option, because it is not. If we do not act now, further down the line, buyers, processors and retailers will increasingly be making demands to move to lower-carbon systems. As the former NFU Scotland president, Nigel Miller, noted recently, now is the time for Scottish farmers to catch up and to lead on reducing methane emissions.

These regulations must be passed tonight to ensure that we can continue to support our suckler beef producers from 2025 onwards and help our farmers and crofters to meet the challenges of the future.

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions, S6M-15810 and S6M-15811, on approval of United Kingdom statutory instruments. I ask Jamie Hepburn to move the motions on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:20

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Shona Robison is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-15792.3, in the name of Shona Robison, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15792, in the name of Craig Hoy, on delivering a commonsense budget for Scotland, 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.

17:20

Meeting suspended.

17:24

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-15792.3, in the name of Shona Robison. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 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)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-15792.3, in the name of Shona Robison, is: For 73, Against 28, Abstentions 21.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question, therefore, is that motion S6M-15792, in the name of Craig Hoy, on delivering a commonsense budget for Scotland, as amended, 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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
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)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
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-15792, in the name of Craig Hoy, on delivering a commonsense budget for Scotland, as amended, is: For 94, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes steps in the draft 2025-26 Budget to introduce a universal Winter Heating Payment and create the systems necessary to effectively scrap the two-child benefit cap in 2026, and looks forward to further engagement between the Scottish Government and the parties represented in the Parliament in advance of the next stage in the budget process.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15809, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, 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)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

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)
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)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
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)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
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)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15809, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on approval of an SSI, is: For 73, Against 49, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Support (Improvement) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: As no member objects, the final question is, that motions S6M-15810 and S6M-15811, on approval of United Kingdom SIs, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. This is becoming a habit that I am not proud of, but, in relation to an earlier point, I forgot to refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests, so I do that now.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Eagle. That concludes decision time.

Changing Places Toilets (Funding)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14427, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, on reversal of £10 million funding for changing places toilets. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its shock that the Scottish Government has, it understands, gone back on its pledge to invest £10 million to increase the number of Changing Places toilets across Scotland; notes that this promise was made originally in 2021 by the former First Minister as part of the 2021-22 Programme for Government, and was repeated numerous times by multiple ministers over the following years; understands that Changing Places toilets are not a luxury facility, but are vital for many profoundly disabled people to take part in society, including those in the Lothian region; considers that this is the latest in a long list of examples of the Scottish Government not taking seriously the needs of disabled people and allowing them to pay the price of what it sees as Scottish National Party (SNP) financial mismanagement; echoes the disappointment that has been expressed by many individuals and organisations in response to the announcement, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to honour the promise that it made to disabled people.

17:31

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am often asked which achievement I am most proud of from my time in Parliament. When I look back over my time here, one of the things that comes to mind is the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, as we managed to secure a provision that any new developments over a certain size must include a changing places toilet. That amendment guaranteed that any new public space must be accessible to all, and gave people with profound disabilities the comfort of being able to toilet with dignity. It is regrettable, however, that some developments are dragging their feet on fulfilling that requirement.

For example, I recently visited the Edinburgh futures institute at Quatermile, which was set up by the University of Edinburgh. Despite significant engagement, it still has no plans to install a changing places toilet. I hope that it will see the error of its stance, and very quickly prioritise making the facility accessible to all.

Changing places toilets are not a luxury or a nice optional extra—they are an absolute necessity in order for many people to be able to participate in society. They bring not only help to the disabled but economic benefit to those that have such facilities in place. They are often the

difference between a disabled person being able to go out or having to stay in.

I highlight amazing organisations such as PAMIS—Promoting a More Inclusive Society—which works tirelessly to promote changing places and to inform the public about the benefits and whereabouts of those facilities. Without that organisation, I do not think that we would have made nearly as much progress as we have done.

Turning to the motion, I am sure that members will be aware of a promise that was made by the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, in 2021. A £10 million fund specifically for the installation of changing places was to be created, following the lead of the United Kingdom Government. That money would make a real difference to the lives of disabled people, as has happened in England, where all the money has already been distributed. Unfortunately, however, no money has materialised in Scotland—it has been flushed away.

After three years of leading disabled people on, the Scottish Government finally admitted what many had suspected for years—that it had no intention of distributing the money. For three years, organisations, developers, charities and others were waiting for the much-needed funds that would allow them to put in changing places—and all of a sudden, that money was gone.

It is well known that the Scottish Government is very good at making big announcements and very poor at delivery. Even for the Scottish Government, however, this was a devastating betrayal. We should make no mistake about it—we are not talking about a lot of money. It represents a tiny fraction of the budget, but it would make a huge difference to disabled people across Scotland. However, the Scottish National Party Government took the decision to punish disabled people. Yesterday, in the human rights debate, we heard about what a good record the Government has, but of all the cuts that it could have made, it decided that disabled people had had it too good for too long.

However, there was then a glimpse of hope. At a recent meeting of the cross-party group on changing places toilets, we invited the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport to come and explain to MSPs, the third sector and other stakeholders and individuals why it had cut the funding, and what the SNP was going to do to make that disgrace right. We were encouraged that Maree Todd told us that we should wait for the budget, and that the Government was going to commit money for changing places.

We were perhaps not expecting that the whole £10 million would be reinstated, but we thought that some money would be better than nothing.

However, I listened very carefully to the statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government last week; I scanned the budget documents; and I asked the Scottish Parliament information centre to do the research, and none of us could find a single mention of changing places toilets in the budget.

I accept that I, or SPICe, may have missed something. I would therefore like the minister to intervene at this point to tell members, and the disability stakeholders to whom she has spoken in recent weeks, what money is earmarked in this year's budget.

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I can confirm to members that there is money coming to changing places this year. I will provide a full summary in my summing-up speech. I would say that much of what Jeremy Balfour has said is incorrect and misleading, but I will let him continue.

Jeremy Balfour: I start by thanking the minister, and I look forward to seeing that money, but the problem is that we have heard that money promised before, and then it has been taken away.

Will the minister, in summing up, also tell us when that money will be available, when it will be spent and what the criteria will be? Most importantly, can she tell us that it will not go to organisations that do not need the money, but instead to the third sector, which desperately needs it? The third sector, and disabled people, are listening. They are tired of being left behind, and tired of not knowing whether or not they can go to the toilet with dignity in public. Most of all, they are tired of being promised the world and being delivered nothing.

I look forward to hearing the minister point out any inaccuracy in what I have said in the last six minutes and 58 seconds, because I believe that every word that I have said is factually true. The Government must make this right—get the funding, get it distributed and stand up for disabled people. That is what we want, and we want it now.

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

17:38

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing the debate to the chamber. Although I disagree with most of the points in his motion, we both agree that changing places facilities are not a luxury but a lifeline for those in our society who rely on them.

This year, I have been engaging with parents of children in Inverclyde who have a range of additional support needs, and with many

constituents who have physical disabilities. Both groups have highlighted how the lack of changing places toilets in Inverclyde is a barrier to their being able to leave their homes. For families, it means travelling to Glasgow or other local authority areas that have more changing places facilities on their patches.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Mr McMillan is making a fine speech, and I do not intend to make this intervention political; I am genuinely seeking information from him as a member of the Government party. The minister alluded to something about money being available for changing places in this financial year. Does Mr McMillan, as a member of the Government party, know how much money that is? There are speeches to follow, so it would be ever so helpful, as we make our speeches, to know exactly what the minister is talking about.

Stuart McMillan: As Mr Kerr will know, I am a member of the governing party, but I am not a member of the Government. The minister has already stated that she will provide a full reply to the question that was posed earlier, and I am sure that Mr Kerr will be delighted to hear that reply.

For disabled adults, the lack of accessible toilets can result in social isolation. Ultimately, it may mean both that money is being lost to Inverclyde's economy and that people and families are missing out on enjoying their local community. There is nothing wrong with going to different parts of the country to enjoy what they have to offer, but in my local authority area—I will not comment on other areas—we have three changing places toilets: at Craigend Resource Centre in the east end of Greenock; at the Greenock health and care centre; and at Tesco at Port Glasgow. The latter two are not places that people would go to for some leisure and recreation.

I therefore agree with Jeremy Balfour that changing places toilets are vital to enable many people to take part in society. They are crucial, and it is a disgrace that, on too many occasions, streetscapes, retail areas and community spaces are not designed with disabled people in mind. That was one of the reasons why, only two months ago, I held a round-table meeting with all the transport providers who deal with Inverclyde, as well as the local authority and Amey. That meeting came about because one of my constituents raised a wide variety of issues, and the issue of changing places toilets very much came up in the discussion. It also came up in the meetings that I had previously, alongside SNP councillors, with family members from the additional support needs network in Inverclyde.

I do not want to be too political—I listened to what Mr Balfour had to say, and to the non-political question from Mr Kerr. Nonetheless, it is a

bit rich for the Conservatives to suggest that the SNP has failed disabled people due to financial mismanagement. To be frank, disabled people in Scotland will receive support that they would not receive if they lived in other parts of the UK—free prescriptions and free personal care are just a couple of examples. On benefits, Social Security Scotland has adopted a fairer, more person-centred approach to welfare.

Jeremy Balfour: I welcome what the member has said up to now. However, is he, too, disappointed that the £10 million that was previously in the Scottish Government's budget was taken away? Fewer toilets were able to be built because that money was taken away and used for other things.

Stuart McMillan: Mr Balfour will be aware of the Scottish Government's financial situation this year. There were reductions in a variety of funds, as has been well documented and spoken about in the chamber.

I wish to make Mr Balfour aware that, in September, I wrote to the Scottish Government with regard to the changing places fund. The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Jenni Minto, replied to me, indicating that the first tranche of investments were going to take place in early 2025. That situation may change—we will find out very shortly—but that was the most up-to-date information that I had as of September this year.

I am conscious of time, Deputy Presiding Officer, so I will conclude. I want to see more changing places toilets provided across Scotland, including in my constituency of Greenock and Inverclyde. I want more of them to be made available in leisure facilities in particular, because I want people to be able to enjoy their communities; I do not want them to feel as if they have to be forced to go somewhere else for a day out with their kids. People should be allowed to have a day out in their own community so that they can enjoy what it has to offer. That is why this particular fund is hugely important for social cohesion, and in ensuring that people can enjoy what they have on their doorstep.

17:44

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this evening's debate, and I thank my colleague Jeremy Balfour for bringing it to the chamber.

To be clear, changing places facilities should not be considered to be luxury facilities. They allow certain people with disabilities to access public spaces in a way that they simply would not have been able to do without them. Changing places toilets should be commonplace in

communities across the country. As things stand, however, that is far from being the case.

The consistent closure of council-run facilities across many parts of Scotland, including in my region, has meant that many locations no longer have changing places facilities at all. That is very much the case in my Mid Scotland and Fife region. The announcement of £10 million of funding for changing places toilets in the 2021 programme for government was very much welcomed at the time. That same pledge was repeated by several different ministers at different times through a number of announcements. We heard members across the Parliament challenge the Government to allocate the money where it was needed. However, three years later, the funding has still not been allocated.

Just a few months ago, the Parliament learned that the money for changing places facilities was to be reprofiled. We know that "reprofiled" means that something will not necessarily happen according to the timescales that were given. That means that the measures might not happen for the foreseeable future. The Scottish Government has stated that it is still committed to introducing the funding during this parliamentary session. At this stage, however, it is looking very likely that the funding will be kicked further down the road, so the measures might not happen until after the 2026 elections.

The news from the Scottish Government is that it appears to be backtracking on its commitment, which is deeply concerning to disabled individuals and charities, which had supported and been part of the Scottish Government's processes. Jeremy Balfour's motion describes that as

"the latest in a long list of examples of the Scottish Government not taking seriously the needs of disabled people".

The 2021 programme for government discussed creating a new disability equality plan, which would be created in partnership with disabled people. Three years later, several disabled people's organisations and individuals have made it quite clear that that still requires to be fulfilled. The organisations have been working with the Government for more than 20 months on creating a plan that, they hope, would empower disabled people in every part of Scotland. Now, however, they have been left disappointed, with organisations saying that the process has seemingly collapsed, and all the ambitions that they had no longer seem to be moving forward.

Organisations such as Disability Equality Scotland, the Glasgow Disability Alliance and Inclusion Scotland have all participated, and they are all feeling let down. Their members have been led down the garden path by the Scottish Government, which failed to engage properly with

those individuals and organisations. They have called on the Scottish Government to take “urgent and bold action” on the issue. I certainly hope that the Government is able to listen, and I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say when she sums up the debate.

The debate has been able to shine a light on some of the problems that disabled people in Scotland face. It is now time for the Scottish Government to work with disabled people and their organisations, to deliver the equality plan that disabled people deserve and to ensure that the funding for changing places facilities is delivered in full. Disabled people deserve nothing less.

17:48

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): As convener of the cross-party group on changing places toilets, I welcome another opportunity to discuss this important issue in the chamber. Indeed, it is our second debate this year. I thank my colleague Jeremy Balfour for securing the debate and for his on-going efforts, alongside those of colleagues across the Parliament, to hold the Government to account on the issue, in particular on its failure to advance the promises that it made on support for changing places toilets.

It was good to hear Jeremy Balfour speak about his pride in the achievement made in the previous parliamentary session through changes to planning legislation. I put on record my thanks to Mary Fee, my predecessor, who was involved in those efforts, and to Angela Dulley, the campaigner who is the secretary of the cross-party group, for her efforts in that regard, too. Indeed, I thank everyone in the cross-party group, who all campaign on the issue and call for better support for changing places toilets across Scotland.

I have already referenced the debate that we had on the issue at the start of January, when we discussed the delays to the establishment and opening of the fund. In that debate, and in the CPG meeting that took place the next day, the minister said that the Scottish Government would make the £10 million changing places toilet fund available across the financial years 2024-25 and 2025-26. However, we know that that promise did not play out. Instead of that fund opening in 2024-25, the autumn budget revision took it away. At the time, the minister said that that was a necessary decision for financial reasons during the SNP’s emergency budget revisions. However, she also said that preparatory work on the fund was continuing.

Although I am pleased that, since that autumn budget revision, the minister has told the CPG that the draft version of the fund criteria is almost complete, I am concerned that information that

has been obtained under freedom of information requests shows that, prior to the budget revisions, the minister had been in only one meeting on the fund and that her officials had been at only one other.

Put together, all of that does not give us a lot of confidence that the issue is a priority for the minister. I would be keen to hear much more in her summing up about what has been done not only to secure the money in the forthcoming budget but to ensure that the fund can open quickly, with well-established criteria.

It will be shameful if the commitment is not fulfilled. It would be a shame not only for all the people who rely on changing places toilets but for the wider community of Scotland. Scotland is an attractive place that people want to visit, and we want to attract people regardless of their needs and the support that they require. As well as the basic fundamental human rights that we have heard about, we see the economic benefit that changing places toilets can make to our communities.

Every time that the cross-party group meets, we hear about the need for changing places toilets and the gaps that exist in Scotland. As Jeremy Balfour and others have done, I commend the work of PAMIS and others who support efforts to ensure that we have a clear picture of where changing places toilets are and where there is a need for further ones.

My next point has already been made: there is a record of failure for disabled people in Scotland on the issue that we are discussing. I am seriously concerned about some of the decisions that have been taken. In the year since we previously debated the issue, disabled people’s organisations have withdrawn support for the disability equality plan; the promises to provide health checks for individuals who have a learning disability have been completely unfulfilled, despite £4 million being spent on that; and the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill and the proposed human rights bill have been shelved for at least this session of Parliament. Furthermore, the publication timetable for the strategy on young disabled people’s transitions to adulthood has been extended once again. Therefore, I do not think that it is accurate for SNP members to say that there are not serious issues with support for disabled people. It is clear that that is becoming something of a pattern.

The minister might think that I am being harsh on her and on the Government, but, if she was sat where I am, I think that she would be just as vocal about a Government that has repeatedly broken promises that it made years ago.

I will listen openly, as I always do, to the minister's winding-up remarks, and I hope that, within them, there is a cast-iron guarantee that the fund will open next year. It is not just me who is listening; it is all the members of the cross-party group and all the campaigners and disabled people across Scotland who need these facilities.

17:54

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I start by saying to Stuart McMillan, who referenced free prescriptions, that 96 per cent of all prescriptions in England are free, so it is likely that all the people he was talking about are in receipt of free prescriptions. That is a very important point in terms of verification and fact checking.

I thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing the motion to the chamber, and I pay tribute to him for his campaigning work on behalf of not just people who need changing places toilets but, more widely, the disabled community in Scotland. He is a real champion—a terrier—for that group, and he has rightly raised issues in the chamber tonight that should be treated with great soberness by the minister.

However, I am really confused about the intervention that the minister made on Jeremy Balfour, because she seemed to indicate that there is money but would not say how much there is. I feel as though we might have wasted our time and breath on all these speeches, because she might be about to announce that there is £10 million in this year's budget. If so, I wish that she had said that, so that we could have spent our time congratulating the Government on finally fulfilling the commitment that was made so long ago. However, at this point in time, we do not know whether that is the case, and we are left waiting to hear her speech. Accordingly—you will be pleased to hear, Presiding Officer—I will wrap up my speech pretty rapidly, because we want to hear what the Government is going to say. I hope that the minister will not do what she has done tonight—almost teasing us—again. Alexander Stewart said that the Government has been leading us down the garden path on this issue for a number of financial years, and I would not like to think that the minister has done that tonight.

Jeremy Balfour talked of his proudest moment as a parliamentarian. One of my humblest moments during my time as a parliamentarian, which occurred early in my experience as an elected member, was when Jamie Muir and his team at Blair Drummond safari park asked me to be present for the official opening of their changing places toilet. Also present at that event were people whom PAMIS had brought along: people with various needs that meant that changing places toilets were genuinely transformative

facilities. I can honestly say, looking back at all the things that I have done as an elected member of the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament, that I do not think that I will ever forget the faces of the people at that opening and the joy that they felt at being able to visit the safari park and not suffer the indignity of having to find a relatively clean space on the floor where a member of their family could look after them in an intimate way. I know that a number of members here today will have seen people experiencing the joy that people feel when they are able to visit somewhere without suffering that indignity.

We are talking about the sense of dignity and the sense of independence that changing places toilets create. I think of two quotes in particular when I think of those two aspects. The first is about dignity:

“Using a changing places toilet means I don't have to lie on the floor in a public toilet. It makes me feel valued and respected. It's the difference between staying at home and being able to go out and enjoy life.”

The second quote concerns the sense of independence and self-reliance:

“It's the only reason we can go on holiday or visit certain places. Without changing places it just wouldn't be possible. Having access to these facilities means fewer compromises and more opportunities for spontaneity. When I know there's a changing places toilet nearby, I don't have to plan every outing so carefully. It gives us freedom.”

I salute PAMIS for its 32 years of successful campaigning, and I salute my friend Jeremy Balfour for his campaigning.

I will now sit down and hear the minister tell us what she should have said when she intervened on Jeremy Balfour earlier, which is that there is money in the budget this year for changing places toilets.

17:59

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I have to say that I was somewhat taken aback by the tone of Jeremy Balfour's motion, because I have recently spent time at the CPG reassuring members, disabled people and organisations that represent them that there would be money in the budget this year. So, to answer Mr Kerr's point, there were a number of inaccuracies and misleading points in Mr Balfour's speech, and it will take me some time to correct those; I could not do it in a simple intervention. I am going to take my time in this speech to bring clarity to the situation.

First, I confirm to Parliament that the Scottish Government has not, as Mr Balfour's motion suggests, gone back on its pledge to invest in changing places toilets. For context, on that

particular point, the commitment was to do that during the current parliamentary session, and there are still two budgets left in that session.

I absolutely agree with Mr Balfour and those who have made similar points in today's debate that changing places toilets are vital facilities that enable many profoundly disabled people to take part in society. They are also important for their families and carers.

As I have highlighted to the Parliament previously, the funding will build on our previous work on the changing places toilets agenda. That includes the introduction of the Scottish building regulation legislation in 2019, which many have mentioned, and which requires the provision of changing places toilets in larger new public buildings. There was also the subsequent publication of our changing places toilet planning guide. I am happy to ask my officials to pick up on the point that Mr Balfour raised about the University of Edinburgh building.

Since 2012, the number of changing places toilets in Scotland has risen from 25 to 269. There has been an increase of almost 30 per cent since 2019, when we introduced the new Scottish building regulations legislation, which required the provision of changing places toilets in larger new buildings to which the public has access.

Scotland's geography can make coverage challenging—I am a Highland MSP and I absolutely acknowledge that point—and I will seek to address that in the funding criteria. However, we should celebrate the progress that we have made to date and the fact that Scotland has the highest proportion of changing places toilets per head of population in the whole of the UK.

That increase is, of course, testament to the crucial role of committed individuals and local communities in raising funding for and delivering many of those facilities during the past decade or so. Support from local bodies, particularly from local authorities, has been and will continue to be central to driving the agenda forward. We have worked closely with PAMIS and it is great to hear the positive reports about that organisation. It has been a fantastic source of expertise on changing places toilets, providing advice and support right across Scotland.

There is, of course, much more that we can do. It has taken longer than we anticipated to launch the fund, and I absolutely agree that that is a source of disappointment and frustration for many people, including me. As everyone is aware, the Parliament has faced considerable budget challenges in the past few years, and that has resulted in some difficult decisions across all Scottish Government budgets. However, I can confirm to the Parliament today that funding will be

provided over the next two years to support further investment in changing places toilets.

The Scottish Government's draft budget was published a week ago today, and it is subject to the usual parliamentary scrutiny and process. However, we made the decision to increase the draft mental health budget for the next financial year so that we can build on the improvements that we have made. I remind members that the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, which introduced the building regulations that so many have celebrated tonight, was achieved by the Parliament working together in partnership, as we will all need to do to pass the budget and ensure that the provisions in it come to life.

Jeremy Balfour: I am conscious that your time is running out. Can you tell us—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Jeremy Balfour: I am sorry. Can the minister tell Parliament how much that figure is and whether it will be spent by the third sector in this financial year?

Maree Todd: As the member would expect, there is still some underpinning detail to work through. I expect to be in a position in the new year to give detail about the amount of funding that we propose to provide for changing places toilets and will be happy to update parliamentary committees and the changing places CPG in writing as soon as possible. That funding will be profiled over two years and we are working with stakeholders to understand the level of demand and the stage that projects are at, because that information will inform the profile of the funding over the two years. As I updated the CPG, work is under way to develop the fund criteria to fit the plans and processes. I cannot confirm when those criteria will be available, but I will be very happy to keep Parliament and the CPG involved.

More generally, the Scottish Government has done a great deal—

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: I would like to finish my points, because we are a little short of time.

More generally, the Scottish Government has done a great deal to support disabled people and to mitigate the impacts of decisions that were made by the previous UK Government. This year, we committed a record £6.1 billion for expenditure on benefits—which is £1.1 billion more than the UK Government gives us for social security—including £300 million of additional investment in adult disability payments. We reopened the independent living fund, helping up to 1,000 more disabled people to access the support that they need to live more independently, and our budget

for 2025-26 will continue expanding that fund. We introduced the pension-age disability payment, which is worth between £290 and £434 a month to people of state pension age who are disabled. In response to Alexander Stewart's point, we are investing an additional £2 million to enhance the disability equality plan, in recognition of the work that is needed to improve people's lives.

All that demonstrates that this Government retains a strong commitment to accessibility, inclusion and human rights, in spite of the very challenging times we find ourselves in. Given what we have seen in the past few years, particularly from the previous UK Government, I am not sure that that is something that all my Conservative colleagues could say with hand on heart.

In developing and delivering the changing places toilet fund, I am keen to work in partnership with members from all parties, including with the cross-party group on changing places toilets. This is one issue where we absolutely have cross-parliamentary support, as is demonstrated by today's motion, so let us get on with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate and I close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:08.

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