



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 5 February 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. I remind members that questions 3 and 4 are grouped together, so I will take any supplementary questions on those after the initial questions have been asked. There is an awful lot of interest in supplementary questions. I do not expect to be able to get through them all, but I will require brevity in questions and responses to get through as many as I can.

Question 1 has not been lodged.

Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024

2. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it will take to monitor the impact of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 on small and medium-sized businesses in the local authority areas that apply it. (S6O-04283)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Councils that are planning to introduce a visitor levy are required to establish a visitor levy forum with membership from businesses to provide views on the scheme. In addition, the Scottish Government has been liaising with VisitScotland on re-establishing the expert working group. That will provide a national forum for business and stakeholders to reflect their views and advise on approaches to handling implementation. The Scottish Government will conduct a full review of the operation of the 2024 act within three years of the introduction of the first scheme.

Tim Eagle: Let me share a few brief samples of the many emails that I have received on the issue:

“This levy will decimate campsites in the Highland region”,

“We are already trying to compete with free, and we are losing”,

“Motorhomes are parking up in every lay-by and car park that you can imagine, sometimes right outside the gates of a campsite”,

“The proposed implementation of the visitor levy in Scotland is complex, burdensome, discriminatory and without precedent in Europe”

and

“It will potentially push small businesses above the VAT threshold”.

Constituents of mine, and the Deputy First Minister's, are concerned about the issue. I am not even trying to be political; the levy is genuinely scaring small businesses, which are vital to our and other regions. Will the Deputy First Minister commit to look again at the form of the levy and what it encompasses and speak with councils about a potential pause on introduction while that happens?

Ivan McKee: I am obviously not the Deputy First Minister, but I shall answer the question as best I can from my lowly position. The responsibility for implementing and taking forward the consultation lies with local authorities—in this case, Highland Council. I encourage the member and all the businesses that have engaged with him and others to engage with the consultation process as it proceeds.

We recognise the importance of business input to the implementation of the levy in each council area and the input that businesses can make to how the funds are taken forward to better the local area for the use of visitors and make localities more attractive for visitors who will support those businesses.

This form of visitor levy is in place in the majority of European Union countries, so it is not unusual. We will continue to engage with businesses through VisitScotland and other channels to take on board the points that he has made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need brevity in questions and answers, please. Karen Adam has a supplementary question.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Raising revenue through a visitor levy has the potential to be transformative, particularly in high-traffic tourist destinations, and placing the powers in the hands of local authorities ensures that no region is disadvantaged in a one-size-fits-all approach. Will the minister say more about how the decision to empower local government could benefit communities and businesses across Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, minister.

Ivan McKee: A visitor levy can help to support Scotland as a tourist destination. It gives councils the opportunity to invest funds in visitor-related facilities, expanding and enhancing the appeal of their local areas. It can provide support for local infrastructure and the maintenance of public

spaces and deliver benefits for residents and visitors. By empowering local authorities in that way, we can help to deliver improvements that strengthen communities and enrich the visitor experience. We recognise the importance of engaging with businesses at a local level to ensure that the levy delivers on those aspirations.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): With each council area devising its own visitor levy scheme, there is no universal assurance that patients from island and rural areas who require overnight accommodation to access healthcare and treatment outwith their home areas will not be impacted by the levy. What will the Scottish Government do, therefore, to ensure that island patients are not penalised when attending mainland hospitals?

Ivan McKee: I know that Beatrice Wishart has raised that issue previously, and has written in on it and had some response. I recognise the issue that she raises. As I said, the operation of the levy is for local authorities to take forward, working within the confines of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024, and it is for them to consider the issues that are raised in that regard at a local level.

Ferguson Marine (Discussions)

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the board of Ferguson Marine and what was discussed. (S6O-04284)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Scottish Government met with the Ferguson Marine board on 30 January. Updates were given by the chief executive and the chief financial officer, and there were discussions about the yard's future strategy and business operations.

Graham Simpson: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that answer—no doubt, at that meeting, the progress of the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa would have been discussed. This morning, the Public Audit Committee heard that there could be delays to the Glen Rosa, and extra costs, which is quite alarming.

I have subsequently been told by a source that that delay could be until April. Does that chime with what the Deputy First Minister understands? Would she regard April as an unacceptable delay? What would be a reasonable extra cost, in her view?

Kate Forbes: I am afraid that I do not operate on the basis of sources—I operate on the basis of the letters that are sent to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee as updates on progress that is being made. As the member will know, those letters address matters around timetabling and matters relating to cost. As he knows, the

Glen Rosa is now the yard's primary focus, and all of the workforce is focused on delivering that vessel.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. The Deputy First Minister just referred to letters that should be sent to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. I would like it noted on the record that the letter that was due at the end of January has not yet been received, nor has there been any reason given for why it was late.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order.

Ferguson Marine (Running Cost)

4. **Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what the total monthly running cost of Ferguson Marine is. (S6O-04285)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The running costs are a commercial matter for Ferguson Marine to answer. Monthly charges to the Scottish Government fluctuate, based on the work that is undertaken under current contracts.

Edward Mountain: Let me help the Deputy First Minister in answering that question. The monthly under-recovery, as quoted by Ferguson Marine, is £1 million per calendar month. It has been suggested that it costs £20 million a year to run Ferguson Marine if there is no recovery of any works. That is £84,000 per job. How will the Scottish Government fund that if it does not give the small vessels contract to Ferguson Marine?

Kate Forbes: I hope that the member is not recommending that we break procurement law. The yard is tendering for new vessels, and that will be managed as it should be in accordance with procurement law.

The number that the member quotes, if I understand it correctly, covers all employment at the yard, plus overheads in central administration costs. Perhaps he can clarify that.

Now that the Glen Sannox has been completed, the bulk of the workforce at Ferguson Marine is working on the delivery of the Glen Rosa, and those costs are therefore recoverable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a lot of supplementaries here; I will not get through all of them, but I will get through as many as I can.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the Scottish Government's £14.2 million investment—as we heard this morning in the Public Audit Committee, £9 million of that is for the

next budget year—would be a significant step in helping to develop the yard so that it can secure both public and commercial contracts?

Kate Forbes: The £14.2 million will be invested over two years. It will support a range of initiatives to improve productivity and will help to give the shipyard the best possible opportunity to bid for and secure new work.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Securing future work will be key to securing the future of Ferguson's yard. Board papers from May last year say that it got positive legal advice on a direct award for the small vessel replacement programme. The GMB union would like to know what the Scottish Government's reaction was to that advice and why the Government did not act on it. If Ferguson Marine does not get the award of the contract in the first round, will the direct award still be considered for the second round?

Kate Forbes: As I said in my answer to Edward Mountain, a live procurement process is underway and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on it. It needs to go down the road that is understood for those processes. The Scottish Government has set out an approach to future work, and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will update the Parliament on the tender and procurement for the second phase of the small vessel replacement programme.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is essential that the demand signal from public sector procurement underpins Scottish ship building? To achieve that, could she look at emulating what the Australians have done with the Australian marine complex in Perth? It is set up as a common user facility, which means that, regardless of who wins public procurement contracts, the companies can use the infrastructure and the facility in Australia to deliver the programmes.

Kate Forbes: Right now, we are working with Ferguson Marine to focus on improving productivity and to invest in the equipment and machinery that it needs to update in order to enable the company to compete internationally for procurement work. Irrespective of what ends up happening with the ownership of the yard, our commitment is to continue to invest in it as a shipbuilding facility. The first step is to ensure that it can compete internationally.

Artificial Intelligence Sector

5. **Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working to increase investment in Scotland's artificial intelligence sector. (S6O-04286)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government is working

with our enterprise agencies to promote investment and growth in our tech and AI ecosystems, which help AI companies at all stages of growth and facilitate collaboration between AI companies, academic institutions and other partners to support knowledge exchange and innovation. We are working closely with partners across the private and public sectors, including the Data Lab and the National Robotarium, to maximise the impact of our programmes and help the AI sector to flourish. We support economic opportunities for AI through the AI Alliance, which is our delivery body for our AI strategy.

Foysoil Choudhury: The release of Chinese AI DeepSeek shows how quickly the artificial intelligence sector is moving and how important it is that we support investment in Scotland. The Prime Minister recently announced AI growth zones to accelerate growth and innovation in the sector, and said that Scotland has a great potential to be designated as one of those zones. Will the minister welcome a Scottish AI growth zone and discuss it with the United Kingdom Government?

Richard Lochhead: I raised that issue with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Peter Kyle, during a phone call prior to the Prime Minister's announcement. His announcement was a bit disappointing, given that he spoke about AI strengths throughout the UK, but stopped at the border and did not mention any of the strengths in Scotland. That was a great pity, because Scotland leads the world in some aspects of AI, according to many commentators. We need the UK's AI strategy to support Scotland, and we need UK secretaries of state to stop talking up the golden triangle of London, Oxford and Cambridge and calling that the home of innovation, which they are doing at the moment. I am pursuing those priorities.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Last year, I secured a members' business debate that gave MSPs the chance to discuss the rapid evolution and potential of artificial intelligence. I firmly believe that we have a duty to assess the risks and to protect society and vulnerable individuals from harm by taking swift action to regulate the reach and use of AI. In the light of that, what is the Government doing to ensure that, while embracing the positives of AI, it is also keeping a close eye on the developing dangers of it?

Richard Lochhead: The member raises very important issues. Our AI strategy is built on the premise of delivering trustworthy, ethical and inclusive AI for the people of Scotland. Although regulation in relation to many of the points that the member raises is reserved to the UK Government,

we are taking a lot of steps in Scotland to promote the appropriate use of AI.

The Scottish AI Alliance has a number of programmes, such as living with AI, the Scottish AI playbook and the children and AI project, which are pursuing the aims that the member has mentioned.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Funding for an AI supercomputer at the University of Edinburgh was pulled by the Labour Government. It has followed that by announcing that it will be investing in AI projects elsewhere, including in Oxford and Cambridge, as the minister said.

Given that the Labour Government now seems to avoid investing in Scotland, what discussions has the minister and his colleagues had with it on the issue? Can he say any more about how the Scottish Government is working to grow the tech industry here?

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): That is ridiculous. Stop talking Scotland down.

Richard Lochhead: The member raises some important issues, which I understand that members on the Labour benches, who are muttering away, do not like to be aired in the chamber.

It is really important that an AI growth zone in Scotland is announced shortly. The first zone will not be in Scotland, but we want one in Scotland to be announced through the UK Government's new AI action plan, as soon as possible, which is an issue that I have raised with Peter Kyle. I also raised the issue of the exascale supercomputer in Edinburgh, which has been cancelled or postponed, and that we now have a window of opportunity to revisit the issue through the AI action plan. On-going discussions will be taking place between the University of Edinburgh and the UK Government on that issue, and we will lend our support to the University of Edinburgh in its efforts to secure that investment for Scotland as quickly as possible.

It is really important that the UK Government recognises Scotland's strengths and stops talking up only Oxford, Cambridge and London, which is what it is doing at the moment. *[Interruption.]* We have to face up to that reality, so let us pursue the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I discourage members on the front benches from providing a running commentary.

South of Scotland Enterprise

6. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it has carried out an assessment of the economic impact

on Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders of the South of Scotland Enterprise agency, since its inception in 2019. (S6O-04287)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): South of Scotland Enterprise has delivered tangible benefits for businesses and communities in the south. Last year, the agency invested £13.7 million in business and community enterprises and £5.7 million in 48 strategic projects, including the Chapelcross energy transition zone and Borders innovation park.

The agency helped to create or safeguard more than 1,700 jobs, worked with more than 1,400 entrepreneurs and led the first pathways pilot to help underrepresented founders to start their own business.

Emma Harper: It is clear that SOSE has had an important impact across Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, with its teams working hard to support and grow local businesses as well as supporting communities. Can the Deputy First Minister comment on what conversations have been had regarding projects that will attract business and, in particular, young people to the region to grow the local economy?

Kate Forbes: There are across the south a number of exciting projects in development that will provide opportunities for young people. South of Scotland Enterprise is delivering a pioneering pathways project that will support young entrepreneurs to bring their business visions to life through coaching, advice and financial support. Its youth advisory forum ensures that young people's voices are heard and that they are involved in finding solutions to the barriers that they face.

South of Scotland Enterprise works closely with business, Borders College, Dumfries and Galloway College and Scotland's Rural College to design curriculum choices that target growth sectors.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): South of Scotland Enterprise's budget is proposed to be cut from £35 million in 2023-24 to £29 million in the forthcoming year. What effect will having £6 million less to invest than two years ago have on the agency's economic impact?

Kate Forbes: Both the resource funding and the capital funding that are being allocated to South of Scotland Enterprise in 2025-26 reflect an increase in funding compared to 2024-25. Due to the reduction in the financial transactions that have been allocated to the Scottish Government by the UK Government, we have not been able to maintain South of Scotland Enterprise's financial transactions allocation, which accounts for most of the difference in funding between 2022-23 and 2025-26.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

As Colin Smyth said, we are seeing a 15 per cent cut in the Scottish Government's funding for SOSE in its budget for the year ahead, compared to the funding from last year. If it is such a valuable organisation, why is its funding being cut?

Kate Forbes: These questions are starting to sound a little like groundhog day, because we have written to Murdo Fraser. I am happy to write to him once again to outline the fact that he is not comparing like with like. As I set out in my answer to Colin Smyth, both the resource funding and the capital funding that are allocated to South of Scotland Enterprise in 2025-26 reflect an increase in funding compared to 2024-25.

My ambition is for the enterprise agencies to focus more on what they are able to distribute rather than on expanding themselves, because the role of enterprise agencies is to be the front line of support for industry and business.

Postgraduate Business School (Proposal)

7. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding establishing a stand-alone postgraduate business school to help create more companies, attract talent and boost innovation. (S6O-04288)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): Scotland is already home to world-class institutions. As outlined in our national innovation strategy, we are committed to maximising the economic impact of university research through commercialisation and the creation and scaling up of start-ups, spin-out companies and so on. There are no current plans to establish a stand-alone postgraduate business school, but we are focused on working with our universities to make Scotland a world-leading entrepreneurial nation.

Ben Macpherson: I agree with everything that the minister said. In recent engagements with entrepreneurs, we have discussed how innovative Scotland is and how good existing business schools in universities such as the University of Edinburgh are. Could we build on that and benefit from an additional internationally prestigious, postgraduate-only establishment, similar to INSEAD in France or the London Business School, to help further develop Scotland's remarkable economic potential in the 21st century? Would the Scottish Government be open to further engagement on that proposal?

Richard Lochhead: It is important that we are ambitious, and although we have no current plans to set up such a school, I would be happy to have further engagement on the idea with Ben

Macpherson and the university sector, as appropriate.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Investment in higher education and business is critical to attracting and retaining the best talent, which is needed to help to deliver economic growth. However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported a large-scale real-terms decrease in the funding that is provided to Scottish universities, and there are real concerns that that investment has not been prioritised. How realistic are plans to establish a stand-alone business school?

Richard Lochhead: As I said, there are currently no plans to establish a stand-alone business school, albeit that I am very happy to explore whether that is an option for Scotland.

Having spoken to the university research sector in Scotland, as I regularly do, I know that one of the biggest barriers is immigration regulations and the bureaucracy involved in getting academics and appropriate staff into the country. We should also be conscious of that.

The budget includes more than £1.1 billion of investment in teaching and research at Scottish universities.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Is the issue not that our business schools are trying to compete with one another? As a result, none of them is in the top 50 of the QS World Rankings. Should we not ask our business schools to collaborate, particularly on areas of expertise such as renewables, food and drink, and financial services?

Richard Lochhead: I have a lot of sympathy for the point that the member makes. We have seen a lot more collaboration among our universities in recent years. I promoted that as the minister responsible for universities a few years ago, and it has been paying dividends. If there is scope for further collaboration among our business schools to achieve greater international status, we should explore that, and I would be interested in finding out more about it.

Night-time Economy (Glasgow)

8. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support and grow the night-time economy in Glasgow. (S6O-04289)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The night-time economy is vital to Glasgow's prosperity. We continue to do everything that we can to support hospitality businesses to thrive. We are offering a 40 per cent relief, which is capped at £110,000 per business, for hospitality premises as well as music venues

with a capacity of up to 1,500 people that are eligible for the basic property rate. Around half of properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will continue to be eligible for 100 per cent relief under the small business bonus scheme. We are also supporting the sector through the tourism and hospitality industry leadership group and the new deal for business.

Sandesh Gulhane: Glasgow's night-time economy generates £2.16 billion annually and supports 16,600 jobs, yet pubs are closing twice as fast as in England, and nightclubs have declined by 35 per cent in four years. Businesses are struggling due to reduced transport options, prohibitive rail costs, low-emission zone taxi restrictions and extended parking costs.

The 40 per cent rates relief that the minister spoke about will help a few, but I am concerned that most of Glasgow's night-time economy venues will miss out. To quote the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, the move will

“catch headlines but will do little to stop closures and significant job losses in the sector.”

Given those challenges, will the minister outline what measures he will take to revive Glasgow's night-time economy?

Tom Arthur: I am conscious of the priority that is placed on the night-time economy, not just by members of the Scottish Parliament but by Glasgow City Council. A range of factors have impacted night-time economy industries in Glasgow and across Scotland and the wider United Kingdom, stemming from the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, increased energy costs and the forthcoming increase in employer national insurance contributions.

We are committed to working constructively with our local authorities to ensure that the night-time economy can prosper in all parts of Scotland. That is why we have provided support through specific, targeted relief for hospitality in the non-domestic rates system. That sits in the context of a suite of other interventions—short, medium and long term—to support the viability and prosperity of our city centres, from which the night-time industries derive their potential.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Clare Haughey has a very brief supplementary question.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Does the minister share my concerns that the Labour Government's oversight of increasing—not decreasing, as we were promised—energy bills and changes to employer national insurance contributions are placing vast cost and workforce pressures on businesses in the night-time economy in and around Glasgow?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please answer as briefly as possible.

Tom Arthur: The matters that Ms Haughey has raised are echoed by numerous businesses, not just in hospitality but more widely, with which I engage.

When it was running for office, the Labour Party said that energy costs would fall; however, energy costs have increased. It said that it would not increase national insurance; however, it is increasing employer national insurance contributions. That is having a negative effect on the wider economy and will clearly have an impact on night-time industries. However, as I said, the Scottish Government is committed to supporting our night-time industries and will continue to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to those members whom I was not able to call. We move to the next portfolio.

Finance and Local Government

14:27

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Again, members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

School Building

1. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the finance secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding infrastructure investment plans for the building of new schools, in light of the recent Audit Scotland report, which noted that further borrowing will be needed to invest in these. (S6O-04290)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government continues to discuss with Scottish ministers the issues that affect local government. Although it is the statutory responsibility of local authorities to manage their school estate, the Scottish Government will continue to provide them with significant funding support through the £2 billion learning estate investment programme, which will deliver modern, state-of-the-art learning environments and benefit tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland.

Fulton MacGregor: My constituency has certainly been grateful to benefit from the Government's investment in schools over recent years, with some fantastic examples of new builds across Coatbridge and Chryston, including the very recently opened Riverbank primary school and Chryston primary school. However, there are

still areas for which the council has no plans for new schools. One of those is in the village of Moodiesburn, where the community strongly feels that there is an urgent need for new school buildings and the associated community facilities. Many constituents have now raised that with me. What more can be done to ensure that North Lanarkshire Council is able to bring all schools in the area up to the same modern standard, including in places such as Moodiesburn?

Ivan McKee: As Fulton MacGregor rightly points out, the Scottish Government has already provided North Lanarkshire Council with significant funding support for the delivery of new schools, even though it is the statutory duty of local authorities to manage their school estate. The proportion of Scottish schools that are in good or satisfactory condition has increased from 62 per cent in 2007 to 91 per cent in 2024. We have committed to working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities and the Scottish Futures Trust to explore how we can deliver further improvements in the school estate across Scotland.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The new Ardrossan academy was originally estimated to cost £31.5 million but, by last year's budget, that cost had more than doubled, to £75 million. What more can be done to support councils that are having to meet the soaring construction costs that are required for new projects, and how is that taken into account in budget allocation?

Ivan McKee: I have already made it clear that the Scottish Government continues to support local authorities through the £2 billion LEIP funding and it will continue to do so. Clearly, construction inflation is impacting us all. That has not been helped by Brexit and a range of other factors, but the Government will continue working with local authorities to do what we can to support their efforts to build on the substantial improvement that we have seen in the condition of the school estate across Scotland over the past number of years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan joins us remotely.

Local Government (Staff Recruitment and Retention)

2. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it will do to address any difficulties with recruitment and retention in local government due to the reported declining value of pay. (S6O-04291)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government values the contribution of local government workers. In 2024-25, we provided £77.5 million of additional funding

to support local government to make a pay offer that protected the value of pay for those on the lowest incomes by providing an uplift of 5.63 per cent. The offer was better than that made elsewhere in the United Kingdom and additional funding is baselined in the 2025-26 budget.

Although decisions on pay are for local authorities as employers, the Scottish Government will continue to engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on recruitment and retention, wider workforce planning and pay.

Carol Mochan: The value of pay for local government workers has been declining for many years. Over the past year, mortgage interest payments have increased by 17.6 per cent and average two-bedroom rents are up by 6.2 per cent, yet local government workers are expected to get by on a pay increase that is well below that level. Minister, would you apply for a job in which the value of your pay is almost certain to decrease every year?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair. I call the minister. [*Interruption.*]

Ivan McKee: As a member is shouting from the back benches, ministers have not taken a pay increase for 18 years.

I absolutely recognise the member's point. As I said, that is why the Scottish Government provided that £77.5 million of additional funding last year to support local government, which resulted in an uplift of 5.63 per cent for the lowest-paid workers. I reiterate that that is a better offer than was made elsewhere in the UK. Additional funding is baselined in the forthcoming year's budget, and it was at the request of the unions that successive pay deals have prioritised the lowest-paid local government workers.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that Scotland's average public sector pay is £2,300 a year higher than it is in the rest of the UK, amounting to an additional £1.3 billion, much of which goes to local government workers, and that Scotland's lowest-paid local government employees not only have the UK's highest basic pay but are liable for lower income tax and council tax? Will he therefore encourage his Labour counterparts in England and Wales to match Scotland's local government rates of pay?

Ivan McKee: I thank the member for pointing out those facts. I am proud of the pay deals that give Scotland's public sector workers, nurses, teachers and others higher salaries than those in the rest of the UK.

The First Minister and the COSLA president wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the start of January to call on the UK Government to

fully fund the costs of all public service providers in Scotland. Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government announced an additional £144 million for local government, which is equivalent to the net revenue that would be raised nationally by a 5 per cent increase in council tax, to help councils avoid inflation-busting council tax rises.

We now need the UK Labour Government to step up and provide full funding to avoid councils having to make hard choices to impose a tax that goes straight to the Treasury coffers when it sets its budgets later this month.

Local Development Plans (Planning Guidance)

3. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider reviewing the planning guidance provided to local authorities relating to issuing a call for ideas/sites when undertaking their statutory requirement to prepare a 10-year local development plan. (S6O-04292)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Local development planning guidance that was published in May 2023 advises planning authorities on using an optional call for sites or ideas when preparing their local development plans. That is one of several ways in which people can have their say. Further advice is set out in our guidance on effective community engagement in LDPs, which was published in December 2024.

Planning authorities are responsible for preparing LDPs, including gathering information that is needed to support decisions on future development. The Government is monitoring the progress of new-style LDPs and will consider updating the guidance if experience suggests that that would be appropriate.

Bob Doris: Scottish Government local development plan guidance includes a reference to a call by councils for ideas or sites, including

“for development sites or types of development e.g. housing.”

In practice, landowners and developers are given an early opportunity to influence the development of a plan. For instance, a potential developer has used a call for sites to put a large-scale housing development on a green-belt site at Blackhill Road in Summerston, in my constituency, although it had been rejected previously for very good reasons.

I ask the Scottish Government to consider how guidance could be improved to give a greater voice to communities at the earliest stage. I know that many of my constituents want to see local brownfield sites developed and the green belt

protected; they would wish a development plan to reflect that very thing.

Ivan McKee: The guidance sets out that any call for ideas is expected to be open to everyone to propose ideas for any aspect of the plan. It is not limited to suggestions for development sites or types of development.

Our guidance on effective community engagement in local development planning, which was published in December last year, outlines all the opportunities for individuals to have a say in local development plans.

Local place plans can also be used by communities to outline their aspirations for the future development of their place, and those must be taken into account in local development plans. I encourage the member to look into that, and I am happy to engage with him on the detail of that approach.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the minister agree that, despite all that, the planning system in Scotland remains fundamentally discretionary? That can often introduce conflicts in the planning process when plans are just presented and are developer led.

The German system could be an interesting benchmark. It is more codified, which means that people know well in advance what the preferred styles and densities are for developments. That can introduce a less contentious system and give greater certainty for developers to invest, because they know what they can build out and where.

Ivan McKee: One of the drivers behind the move to the revised national planning framework 4 has been for the planning system to be plan led as much as possible. We see that as encouraging developers to focus on the land that has been identified in local development plans, that have been made through the process that we have outlined, to make sure that developments are plan led and that not as many applications are made outside the plan.

I am happy to engage with the member on opportunities for us to further develop the plan-led system, to give more of the clarity that he describes.

NHS Fife (Infrastructure Investment Pipeline)

4. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the finance secretary has had with NHS Fife regarding the revised infrastructure investment pipeline. (S6O-04293)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The importance of health infrastructure was a key consideration in the 2025-26 budget-setting process. Additional capital investment of

£139 million will support improvements across the national health service estate and will provide increased core capital funding for NHS boards as well as funding to support boards' priority areas for infrastructure investment.

The Scottish Government is working closely with all NHS boards, including NHS Fife, to develop a whole-system NHS infrastructure plan. That will consider health infrastructure needs for the whole of Scotland to inform the allocation of funding. The approach supports the continued safe operation of existing facilities and the determination of longer-term investment priorities.

Annabelle Ewing: The minister may not be aware that Fife Council has just granted planning permission for the new medical centre for Lochgelly.

Now that there is clear support from NHS Fife and the local community, recognition by the Scottish Government that the current site is not fit for purpose and planning permission in place, will the Scottish Government fulfil the promise that it made way back in 2011 to deliver a new medical centre for Lochgelly?

Ivan McKee: As we announced in the Scottish budget, there is continued challenge and uncertainty in the capital funding position. Combined with the reductions in capital funding in recent years, that means that we cannot afford all our capital commitments or all the projects that we might wish to commit to.

The member is correct in saying that Lochgelly medical centre was not included in the infrastructure investment plan from 2021-22 to 2025-26, which identified the priority health capital projects for funding in that period. However, the infrastructure investment plan pipeline beyond that period will be reviewed after the United Kingdom spending review. All due consideration will be given to which projects can be included in that revised pipeline, including the Lochgelly facility that the member mentions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Annabelle Ewing was quite right to raise that issue, because it is extremely important.

Does the minister agree that the provision of out-of-hours services in St Andrews, which has been under considerable pressure, also deserves Government attention to ensure that its widespread use is continued?

Ivan McKee: As I indicated, the process that we have in place means that health boards identify their local priorities and they will be considered as part of the whole-system NHS infrastructure plan. I am sure that the requirement that Liz Smith identified in St Andrews will get due consideration as part of that process.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Stratheden hospital, near Cupar, provides mental health services, but it is housed in a Victorian building. It has inadequate services, insufficient room and a lack of privacy, and there is not enough space for therapeutic services. The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland has been critical of its facilities. Will the minister consider Stratheden hospital in the infrastructure plan?

Ivan McKee: I thank the member for raising the situation in that locality in addition to the others that have been raised. As I have indicated, the process will give due consideration to all those priorities.

As part of the process, the whole-system NHS infrastructure plan will be pulled together and the infrastructure investment plan pipeline will be reviewed, as will the specific asks of any other member who raises an ask for funding in any other supplementary question.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister will understand the frustration from around the chamber because of the number of projects that members want, but the infrastructure investment pipeline is something of a holy grail for the Government. It is fabled and never found, and it is difficult to determine where it might be. We expected it with the budget in December 2023, but it never came. We were told that we would have to wait until after the spring budget in March 2024, but it never came. Next, the cabinet secretary for finance said that it would come with the medium-term financial strategy in May 2024, but it never came. Can we have a commitment from the finance minister that it will come before the summer recess?

Ivan McKee: The cabinet secretary indicated the timing of the plan, but the member needs to recognise that the certainty that we require from the UK spending review is hugely important in giving us clarity on what funds are available to support projects that would be included in the infrastructure investment plan. Without that certainty, we are unable to take forward that plan.

Income Tax

5. **Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what factors it considered when determining not to introduce any new bands or increase the rates of Scottish income tax for the remainder of this parliamentary session. (S6O-04294)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): As part of our recently published tax strategy, we engage with 65 different organisations in Scotland, including businesses, think tanks, academics, civil society groups and tax professionals. After listening to the views of

those stakeholders, we are providing a period of stability on income tax for the lifetime of the parliamentary session. That will provide businesses with the confidence to invest in Scotland and support our economic growth priorities. Stakeholders have praised that approach and have welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the development of our tax strategy. We will continue with that engagement as we implement the strategy.

Craig Hoy: Speaking last year, the Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes, warned that the nature of tax policy in a devolved context means that it is very easy for people to move. Despite that warning, the Scottish National Party continues to increase tax by stealth by freezing the thresholds in the upper bands, meaning that more Scots are paying higher marginal rates of tax in what is already the highest-taxed part of the UK.

Scots also have to contend with the complexity and compliance costs of income tax rates of 19, 20, 21, 42, 45 and 48 per cent. If the minister will not join us in our commonsense crusade to cut tax, is it not time that he tackled the complexity of the Scottish National Party's high-tax regime by reducing the overall number of Scottish tax rates and Scottish tax bands?

Ivan McKee: Common sense dictates that the Conservatives' plans to reduce tax rates would result in up to £1 billion less for the Scottish Government to spend on public services. I will try to square that with the member's previous question, which was on more investment in public services across the country.

The reality is that we watch the behavioural impact of taxation very closely, and more people—across all tax bands—continue to move to Scotland from the rest of the UK than move in the other direction. The tax strategy and tax policies that have been adopted in Scotland have, so far, raised significant additional funds to invest in our public services, and that additional investment in public services is one of the reasons why more people continue to move to Scotland from the rest of the UK than move in the opposite direction.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged, and question 7 has been withdrawn.

“Local government in Scotland: Financial bulletin 2023/24”

8. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Accounts Commission report “Local government in Scotland: Financial bulletin 2023/24”, which was published on 28 January 2025. (S6O-04297)

[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have a little less chatter from some members?

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I welcome the Accounts Commission's independent confirmation that the local government settlement increased in real terms in 2024-25 and in 2025-26. I share the commission's view that the transformation of front-line services must be progressed at pace by all public bodies, including local authorities, and that any transformation must be taken forward in partnership with local communities.

Alex Rowley: Does the minister accept that, despite the increases in funding for local government, the report paints a pretty bleak future for local government finances? Specifically, I draw his attention to the fact that the Fife health and social care partnership is currently projected to overspend by £34.8 million, and it is looking at a number of horrendous proposals that would impact the poorest, the elderly and the most vulnerable in Fife. If it does not achieve those savings, NHS Fife and Fife Council will have to cover the overspend. Will the minister look again at the Fife health and social care partnership's base budget, which is clearly inadequate to meet the needs of the people of Fife?

Ivan McKee: The funds for health and social care partnerships are determined by local partners and the funding for local government through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities formula. Alex Rowley should recognise that the Accounts Commission said that the local government settlement for 2024-25 provided a real-terms increase in funding and that the 2025-26 draft settlement, which was published in December 2024, indicates that there will be another real-terms uplift in funding for councils. The Accounts Commission's report states:

“This initial 2025/26 draft settlement allocates £15 billion of revenue and capital funding to councils, a 5.8 per cent real terms increase on the 2024/25 draft settlement.”

Medication Assisted Treatment Standards

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

14:48

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I take this opportunity to update the Parliament on progress regarding the implementation of the medication assisted treatment standards and the wider work of the national mission.

First, I acknowledge the suspected drug death figures that were published as part of Public Health Scotland's latest rapid action drug alerts and response—RADAR—surveillance report, which highlighted that there were 215 suspected drug deaths between September and November 2024. The 10 per cent reduction on the previous quarter is welcome, but the number of drug deaths remains much too high and serves as a stark reminder of the work that remains to be done.

Behind every statistic is a person and a life that has been lost needlessly. Those people leave behind grieving loved ones, who bear those tragic losses. To them, I offer my sincerest condolences.

That is why the work of the national mission is so important. Its clear-cut aim is to reduce the number of drug deaths and improve lives through a holistic approach. The statistics on harms caused by alcohol are also alarming, and we are committed to tackling those in conjunction with drug harms.

I also acknowledge the recent report of the people's panel on drug-related harms. We are considering its findings and I look forward to providing evidence to the joint committee and setting out our response later this month.

The MAT standards are a key element of our national mission. They take an evidence-based approach to enable the consistent delivery of safe, accessible and high-quality drug treatment across Scotland. In July 2024, Public Health Scotland published its third national benchmarking report, which provided an assessment of the status of implementation of the standards as of April 2024. Ninety per cent of standards 1 to 5 were assessed as fully implemented and 91 per cent of standards 6 to 10 as partially implemented. Although that is positive, I am fully aware that much work must still be done to ensure the successful implementation

of all 10 standards. The benchmarking report acknowledges areas of good practice, but there is still some way to go before everyone, everywhere, can benefit from the same level of support. We continue to work closely with local areas and partners to ensure that measures are in place to support implementation.

More broadly, much of the work of the national mission supports the implementation of the standards and beyond. I will highlight a few of those areas now.

MAT standard 8 commits to improving advocacy for people who use drugs. In December, the First Minister and I had the pleasure of attending the launch of the charter of rights. Developed by the national collaborative, it draws on the experience of those with lived and living experience of substance use. The charter supports people who are affected by substance use to realise their human rights and seeks to empower them to demand the care and support that they need. It also provides those who deliver services with a clear reminder of their duties to ensure a standard of care that reflects those rights. Taking a holistic, person-centred approach that supports improved access and empowers people to make informed choices about their care will support a human rights and health-based approach to the treatment for any substance.

We recognise the importance of adapting services to ensure that people who seek help are able to get the right support at the right time. That is especially important in the area of mental health and substance use, where evidence suggests that needs can intersect and that, to effectively treat one, we must address the other, too. That is the focus of MAT standard 9.

The Government is committed to ensuring that we work across policies and portfolios to better understand common issues and how to resolve them. We are supporting better working links between services and driving a culture of inclusivity that puts the needs of individuals at the heart of everything that we do. In that vein, we commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to produce an exemplar protocol on mental health and substance use, which builds on best practice from across the country and internationally. The protocol, which was published in September 2024, outlines how mental health and substance use services can work better together to deliver a whole-system approach. Building on that, we have commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to support local areas to adapt that protocol to their circumstances, ensuring that the workforce have the tools that they need.

We also know that women who use substances often face unique, gender-specific challenges when accessing treatment and support, which is

why we are committed to taking a gendered approach and ensuring that women can access the right services for them when they need them. That includes our work on developing a good practice guide to help local areas do more to support women who are affected by substance use—and their babies, during the perinatal period—along with efforts to upscale residential rehab services that keep women and families together.

More than £5.5 million has been committed, in conjunction with our whole family wellbeing fund, to support the establishment of two houses run by Aberlour Child Care Trust that are specifically designed to support women and their children through recovery. We confirmed last week that an additional £1 million of funding will be made available to support Aberlour's important work with women and children who are affected by drugs. That additional funding will allow more women and infants to receive the support that they need during that crucial period.

Beyond that, we will also invest a further £1.5 million in broader alcohol and drug services in the next financial year. The additional funding will allow us to support even more people to achieve their own recovery. That whole-family approach is not only a key focus of our approach to recovery, but also a fundamental component of our commitment to keep the Promise. Today is the fifth anniversary of the Promise, and it is important that we acknowledge the important role of early intervention and prevention in keeping families together when it is safe to do so.

I recently saw for myself the impact that early intervention can have on young people's lives when I attended the launch of the new routes service in East Lothian, which is delivered by Circle. It was one of the most impactful visits that I have had the pleasure of experiencing as a minister. The routes service meets young people who are affected by substance use where they are, providing whatever holistic support they need. The results speak for themselves—the service breaks intergenerational cycles of substance use and supports our young people to achieve their goals. Thanks to the whole family wellbeing fund, the service is now available in eight areas of Scotland.

A core pillar of our national mission is to increase access to and the provision of residential rehabilitation. Our vision is for residential rehabilitation to be available to everybody who wants it, and for whom it is deemed to be clinically appropriate, at the time that they ask for it and in every part of the country.

We are also committed to increasing by 300 per cent the number of people who are publicly funded for their placements, with the aim of funding 1,000

people per year by the start of 2026. A recent report that was published in December 2024 by Public Health Scotland concluded that we successfully achieved that target in 2022-23. However, we remain ambitious to sustain and build on that success, so we have made £2 million available this year via the additional placement fund to support that endeavour.

Delivering the MAT standards and advancing the broader national mission requires a skilled and resilient workforce. We are grateful to those who deliver drug and alcohol services, and we recognise that addressing current workforce challenges will not be a quick fix. In spring 2025, the Scottish Government will introduce and support the implementation of a suite of drugs and alcohol workforce publications that have been developed in collaboration with stakeholders. They will outline the knowledge and skills that are required by those who support individuals who use substances, and they will also facilitate access to a range of training opportunities and outline guiding principles for employers to ensure consistent care and support in the workplace for individuals with lived and living experience. As a package, those publications will help to support opportunities to enter, develop and sustain fulfilling careers in the drug and alcohol sector.

As we approach the final year of the national mission on drugs, our attention is turning to the future. Learning from our progress to date and ensuring a smooth transition to the next phase will be key. We have made significant progress in building prevention, treatment and support approaches to reduce the harms caused by substance misuse. However, reducing alcohol and drug-related deaths and wider harms will remain a key priority. It is our intention to work in collaboration with our stakeholders and partners, including those with lived and living experience, to plan for the next steps in addressing the harms caused by drugs and alcohol in Scotland. I look forward to progressing that engagement, including across the chamber.

Moving forward, continued implementation and sustainability of the MAT standards remains a priority. We must also continue to be responsive to emerging threats and ensure that services can continue to adapt to meet those new challenges. MAT implementation should remain at the forefront of our efforts through the remainder of the mission. The standards reinforce a rights-based approach to treatment and emphasise the importance of allowing people to make informed decisions about the types of help that are available to them, which is vital in delivering on the ambitions of our national mission.

In that respect, I hope that the Parliament will join me in supporting the efforts and actions that

the MAT standards and the overall national mission set out to achieve. I look forward to the next benchmarking report publication in the summer. I believe that, if we work together, we will transform the lives of individuals and families across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare my interest as a practising national health service general practitioner.

We still have the highest drug death rate in Europe. The MAT standards were announced in a fanfare in 2021, yet, four years later, people who are seeking help still face unacceptable delays, workforce shortages and a postcode lottery in treatment. Community-led services continue to struggle due to a lack of sustainable funding, and the Government's slow progress is costing lives. Scotland needs urgent action, not more rhetoric, and that means real investment in rehabilitation and a commitment to the Scottish Conservatives' right to recovery plan, which would ensure that everyone can get access to the treatment that helps them to get off drugs for good. The people of Scotland deserve better.

We need measurable results. Given that the Scottish Government's latest project, the Thistle drug consumption room facility, is now operational, my questions are about how the Government will evaluate whether the Thistle is a success or otherwise. What specific—and I mean specific—criteria will be measured? Will the cabinet secretary commit to assessing the centre's impact on not only users but the community that surrounds it? Did the Scottish Government evaluate the impact that was made by investing in the Thistle centre against the impact that that money would have had if it had been used for community-led projects such as the routes project that the cabinet secretary referenced in his statement?

Neil Gray: I recognise what Sandesh Gulhane set out in the opening part of his response to my statement, which is that drug-related deaths in Scotland remain far too high. I acknowledged such in my statement as well. Even when I responded to the latest RADAR figures showing a 10 per cent reduction, I recognised that there can be fluctuation in quarterly data. The reason why the statement is so important is that the purpose of the implementation of the MAT standards is to reduce harm and deaths.

On sustainable funding, I am confident that we will achieve the £250 million national mission. That

funding has created a significant amount of additionality in alcohol and drug partnerships, and there is also the likes of the Corra Foundation funding that goes out to community partners.

On the Thistle centre, as I have set out in relation to previous questions from Mr Gulhane and others, the aim of the pilot is to reduce drug-related harm and deaths and give people access to services that they otherwise would not have approached. We can already see from the evidence from those managing the Thistle centre that that is coming true. I hope that everybody will engage positively with the centre as an additional element of our national mission, because it has to be a holistic approach; no one element is going to fully respond to or resolve matters.

On residential rehab, a report on the capacity that we have available shows that there has been a rise in residential rehabilitation capacity from an estimated 425 beds in 2021 to a maximum of 513 in 2024. That is a rise of 21 per cent, which demonstrates our commitment to taking all possible steps to resolve the matter.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Scotland's drug deaths crisis is a national emergency. Lives are being unnecessarily lost every day across the country, and we must not forget that every one of those deaths is a preventable tragedy.

Although the 10 per cent reduction in drug deaths from the previous quarter is a potential sign of progress, we know that there can be seasonal variations. It is frustrating that the minister would come to Parliament and tell us yet again that the MAT standards are not fully implemented, despite the fact that the national mission on drugs, which was launched four years ago, is now approaching its final year.

Interventions such as the official overdose prevention pilot in the east end of Glasgow will save lives—I had the opportunity to visit the centre recently—but they are not a silver bullet. The Government must properly support health boards to implement all the MAT standards. I am worried that the national mission on drugs will likely fail, given that we are now one year away from its end date and yet drug deaths in Scotland remain the highest in Europe, if not the developed world.

What is the cabinet secretary doing day to day to drive full implementation of the MAT standards across every territorial health board, being cognisant of emerging risks such as the rise of synthetic opioids?

Neil Gray: I am absolutely cognisant of the rise in synthetic opioids and the linked action around the roll-out of naloxone. The naloxone programme in Scotland is so important here.

The action that we are taking is showing demonstrable progress on the implementation of the MAT standards. I share Paul Sweeney's concern that we have not got full implementation, and I set out in my statement that we still have more work to do. We continue to work with local alcohol and drug partnerships and health boards to ensure that that is happening. However, I see from not only alcohol and drug partnerships but Public Health Scotland's benchmarking report that we are making demonstrable progress that we can build upon. I will keep working with health boards, as well as with alcohol and drug partnerships, to ensure that that progress is maintained.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind the chamber that I am employed by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde as a bank nurse.

We need to ensure that care and support are available to people on the day that they ask for help, no matter where they live. Will the cabinet secretary inform me what action is being taken to drive up and ensure consistency in access to treatment across all alcohol and drug partnership areas?

Neil Gray: In the national benchmarking report that was published by Public Health Scotland, 23 of the 29 ADP areas—79 per cent of them—were assessed as “fully implemented” for same-day access. In those areas, 75 per cent of people received their MAT assessment—the first date that the service offered for MAT assessment, when treatment can be initiated, if appropriate—either on the same day of initial presentation or the next day.

We recognise the particular challenges of implementing the standards in rural and island areas and those that have been assessed as “provisional green”, but I am pleased to see that the challenges of rurality are being overcome by maximising access and choice through technology, travel and the provision of different modes of care.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Our discussion is mostly about how we treat people who are caught in addiction. Is the Scottish Government looking at the social determinants that have led to Scotland being such an outlier on drug and alcohol deaths? If we cannot identify the problem, how can we address it properly? Why has Scotland been so bad for so long?

Neil Gray: Brian Whittle raises a very important point, which has been debated by politicians and public health experts. There is undoubtedly a clear correlation between areas of poverty, social deprivation and deindustrialisation and areas that have high rates of drug-related deaths.

The national mission is important in addressing the issues that people who have a substance

dependency face, but the wider work to tackle poverty, which has been the Government's number 1 priority, is also critically important, because it goes to the heart of the health inequalities that drive some of the issues that we are facing today.

Brian Whittle raises an important issue that all of us must consider.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind the chamber that I chair Moving On Inverclyde, which is a local recovery organisation.

Will the cabinet secretary give an update on the steps that are being taken to ensure that there is local accountability in relation to the implementation of the MAT standards, with a view to driving improvements across Scotland?

Neil Gray: I thank Stuart McMillan for the work that he does locally.

Integration authorities for health and social care have a legal responsibility to plan and deliver treatment and recovery services for people who experience drug harms. In June 2023, ministers issued a letter of direction to NHS chief executives and local authority chief executives and chief officers, which requested that they personally sign a public delivery plan for implementing the standards. Those bodies cannot work alone—they must work alongside others, through alcohol and drug partnerships, to ensure that people receive the integrated services that they need.

Following that ministerial letter of direction, the requirement for local areas to provide quarterly update reports on progress against their implementation plans is continuing.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On 16 January, the cabinet secretary met me to discuss the status of MAT standards in Dundee, so he already knows about my concerns that service users and providers in my home city are very sceptical about the continued improvement in the self-assessment reports. What independent validation of the MAT standards assessments is in place?

The experience in Dundee, where many of the recommendations of the Dundee drugs commission of 2019 remain undelivered, does not tally with the self-assessment that is in front of us today.

Neil Gray: The assessments come through Public Health Scotland. I hope that that gives Michael Marra some reassurance, although I recognise the concerns that he raised with me, some of which we are following up on.

Michael Marra also sought clarification on what the Government's intention is with regard to what

will come after the national mission. Today, I have set out my willingness—in fact, my desire—for there to be collaboration across the chamber, as well as with local alcohol and drug partnerships and all interested parties, on what we do to build on the national mission. Paul Sweeney made the point that the work will not have been completed by the end of the national mission. He is right. We will still have work to do, and it will be in all our interests to ensure that we work together to agree on what the framework should look like and on the areas that we need to focus on to ensure that we continue the work to reduce harm and drug-related deaths.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In November, my office took part in naloxone training with the professional, diligent and caring specialist addictions nurse Ruth McCall. The more people who are trained in the use of naloxone, the quicker we will be able to address the issue and reduce the associated stigma. Can the cabinet secretary say more about the uptake of naloxone training across Scotland, especially in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway? What further action is being taken to reduce stigma?

Neil Gray: I thank Emma Harper for taking the time to get herself and her office trained in the use of naloxone. I encourage everyone to take up the opportunity to do so as and when they can. Naloxone distribution has been a key priority for this Government, and we continue to work to ensure that it is available to anyone who wants it. Recent statistics from Public Health Scotland show that more than 75 per cent of people who are at risk of an opioid overdose have been supplied with a kit.

The supplementary question that Emma Harper posed was about the reduction of stigma, which is absolutely critical. The discussions that I have had with families who have lost a loved one to a drug dependency or who live with a family member with a drug dependency point to the reduction in stigma and the ability of people to access treatment as being key areas of improvement under the national mission, which can only be a good thing.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The MAT standards are supposed to drive down the number of deaths and ensure that people with lived and living experience see an improvement in how services are delivered. I welcome the increasing implementation of the standards, but we have to ensure that they are actually changing services. How is the cabinet secretary ensuring that the feedback from living experience is taken into account and used to further drive improvements in service delivery?

Neil Gray: I again reference the interactions that I am fortunate to have had with families and people with lived and living experience. It is critical

that we not just listen but act on what they have to say. We have to ensure that we get it right for everyone and that we have a holistic model that meets everybody's needs.

I point Gillian Mackay to the example of the pilot at the Thistle centre in Glasgow, which Sandesh Gulhane mentioned. People with lived and living experience were involved in the design of the service there and in interviewing the staff to run it. They have therefore been absolutely central, which I believe has resulted in the early success that we have seen. I hope that the pilot at the Thistle will be an on-going success.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Through my engagement with colleagues who work in drug services, I am aware that concerns about access to formal mental health assessment continue, with people often being considered to be too chaotic or using too heavily, being passed between mental health services and, ultimately, struggling to access the care that they need. I very much welcome the cabinet secretary's recognition of the importance of services adapting and the update on the development of the exemplar protocol. Will he provide further detail on the action that is being taken to ensure that there are clear pathways and timescales for mental health support, acknowledging the wider pressures on mental health services?

Neil Gray: I thank Audrey Nicoll for raising that point, and I recognise that we still need to resolve that challenge. I see that in my constituency casework involving people arriving at health services with a substance dependency and a mental health issue. Working across mental health and drugs policy, we commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to produce an exemplar protocol that builds on best practice from around the country and internationally. It outlines how mental health and substance use services can work together to deliver a whole-system approach, which will be absolutely critical to fully delivering and implementing MAT standard 9. That work will support local areas to integrate mental health and substance use services and will ensure that people with co-occurring conditions can get the help that they need regardless of which service they present at.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to ask the cabinet secretary about the mother and child recovery houses that will be provided through the Aberlour Child Care Trust, because the Liberal Democrats made the case for that service being in the budget. Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that every mother and child who needs access to the service will be able to access it in a location close to their home?

Neil Gray: I thank Willie Rennie and Liberal Democrat colleagues for their engagement on the matter. I believe that Jenny Minto met him very recently to discuss it. I hope to visit Aberlour to see the fantastic work that the Liberal Democrats' engagement in the budget process has helped to deliver, and I will report back on that in due course.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary provide some clarity on how the implementation of MAT standard 2 ensures that individuals are fully informed of all recovery options, including abstinence-based treatments, detox and rehab, and not just the MAT standards? As she said, the Government has ambitious rehab targets, yet there are only 140 full-rehab beds available for Scotland, not the 513 detox beds to which the cabinet secretary referred earlier. How will those be made accessible for all, particularly when financial and geographical barriers exist? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that patient choice is genuinely respected and that MAT is not prioritised over other treatment pathways?

Neil Gray: Making sure that people have a range of possible treatments is part of the MAT standards. The member referred to MAT standard 2, and we have increased residential rehabilitation capacity to a maximum of 513 beds in 2024. We have reached the target of 1,000 publicly funded places early, and we want to build on that. However, we also have to recognise that abstinence-based programmes are not for everybody and that we need to trust clinical judgment in the process as well. We need to invest in all aspects of the national mission, as no one element is going to resolve the situation for us. However, where there is a need and it is assessed as being appropriate, we must ensure that there is residential rehabilitation capacity in Scotland, and we are investing in that.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I apologise for being late to the chamber, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Will the cabinet secretary outline the resources that are being provided to recruit, train and retain staff in the ADP workforce?

Neil Gray: We have given greater clarity in the budget for alcohol and drug partnerships, and we have baselined more of their funding to give greater certainty for their investments. We are also investing in the Corra Foundation so that the work that it does from a community perspective can deliver. I would be happy to write to Rona Mackay with more details on all of that.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): How are MAT services working in partnership with the residential rehabilitation

providers to create seamless pathways from medication assisted treatment to abstinence-based recovery? Are there established protocols or referral systems in place to facilitate that transition?

Neil Gray: As we expand our residential rehabilitation capacity, we need to get clarity and ensure that those pathways are robust. That is part of the capacity building that we must deliver. I will provide greater detail on that to Douglas Lumsden in writing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business.

Addressing Child Poverty through Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on addressing child poverty through education.

15:18

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The number 1 priority for the Government is the eradication of child poverty. It is an aspiration that I would hope that every MSP shares, and it is why the Government's motion seeks to be inclusive and recognise that there is more to do. We may differ on the proposed action that we take to get there, but ensuring that Scotland's children grow up in a nation that is free from the scourge of poverty should be something on which all of us can find common cause.

Last week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that Scotland's child poverty rate is forecast to fall by January 2029,

"bucking the trend of rising ... poverty"

across

"the UK."

That is clear evidence of the difference that our policies are making, but we know that more must be done.

The cornerstone of our Government's approach has been investment in a more dignified and generous social security system. Our best start grants support families from birth and during the transition into nursery and primary school. Our Scottish child payment supports children up to the age of 16 and provides unparalleled financial support for families.

Such policies are helping to keep an estimated 100,000 Scottish children out of poverty this year alone. Next year, we will again invest more than £3 billion in policies across Government to tackle poverty and the cost of living crisis. Although the Scottish Government's investments have provided a much-needed safety net for families that are on the brink of poverty, we should not be having to do that in 21st century Scotland.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report tells us that, by 2029, one in five children in Scotland will remain in poverty. In a wealthy country such as Scotland, that should shame us all. It is not good enough and it is why, collectively, all politicians, the Government, councils, services, the third sector and education systems alike must work together to eradicate child poverty. We all know that child poverty is different, because

children are developing and are learning how to speak, play, read and write; fundamentally, they are learning how to communicate. Most of Scotland's children encounter education services for the first time at the age of three. However, we know that the ages from zero to three are the formative years—they are the years that really matter.

Save the Children wrote to members ahead of the debate. I was struck that its briefing said:

"the poverty-related educational attainment gap is already well established before a child starts school ... we need to do more to make sure children from poorer backgrounds are not behind from day one."

I welcome Save the Children's intervention and the support that it has given the Government in funding the commitment to tackle the attainment gap.

The Scottish Government's attainment challenge was a 10-year investment programme, which has transformed how we fund our schools. This morning, I visited Fair Isle primary school in Kirkcaldy.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): We have reached a 20-year high for the number of children who are in temporary accommodation. What will the cabinet secretary say to those children about the chances that the Government is giving them? Why is that number still going up, and not down?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point about temporary accommodation. I know that the matter is being taken forward by the Minister for Housing and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice. There is an inherent link between the responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and my responsibilities as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which I am attempting to set out in the debate. I am more than happy to engage with Jeremy Balfour about the issue that he has raised in relation to my responsibilities.

I will talk a little about how Fair Isle primary school in Kirkcaldy has used its pupil equity fund, because it has been transformative for the school community. It has used the fund to invest in extra teachers, a nurture base and a family support worker; to free up staff time to allow smaller groups of pupils to work together; to support achievement across the school; and even to host coffees and crafts with mums once a week.

I told one of the young boys about the debates that we have in the chamber, which are often about behaviour—I note that the Conservative amendment refers to that. His teacher was going to explain to me the importance of the nurture base, but he said that it would be better if the children did it. Aged 10 and in primary 6, the boy spoke with passion about how the approach that

the primary school had taken had helped him. He was much calmer, could control his emotions and felt safe.

At a Burns supper at the weekend, I was giving the immortal memory and was reflecting on the centrality of education in Robert Burns's life. Education is a part of Scotland's culture for which we all, irrespective of our party affiliation, hold deep respect. I believe that our respect for education needs to extend beyond school; we need to consider the role of education in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

We know that about 97 per cent of schools in Scotland benefit from additional funding via the pupil equity fund. I know that members will understand how PEF is supporting schools in their constituencies. Next year's budget will provide an extra £130 million for PEF directly to headteachers for initiatives that are bespoke to every school—for example, to allow teachers to reduce the costs of the school day. Woodburn primary school in Midlothian is helping families to apply for benefits, including travel cards. During a visit to Braes high school in Falkirk, I was struck by the active and impactful cost of the school day pupil group, which is doing innovative work to reduce or remove costs that are associated with the school day. In recent months, my officials have been working closely with schools in every local authority across the country to gather evidence of the impact of PEF as we reflect on the 10-year programme of investment. We will be sharing their learning in the spring.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for taking an intervention. Does she know when the Scottish Government will be in a position to publish the analysis of PEF's value? There has been a lack of information on the effect of PEF across Scotland.

Jenny Gilruth: I outlined that we will be sharing the learning in spring, so we would seek to publish the data at that time. I invite the member, and members across the chamber, to join me on one of the school visits that my officials and I have planned across the country to speak to pupils, staff and those who work in the third sector about the funding's impact, which has transformed the type of spend that happens in our schools.

PEF is now firmly embedded in our schools and, as I have previously said in committee, my strongly held view is that it should remain beyond this parliamentary session as a catalyst for improvement in areas in which it is needed most. It remains the case that the purpose of this extra funding is to drive educational improvement. The achievement of curriculum for excellence levels—also known as ACEL—data from December shows that our schools have the highest levels of literacy on record and the smallest poverty-related

attainment gap to date. That assures me that pupils are benefiting from the support of their teachers and other staff throughout their primary and early secondary education.

Since 2009-10, under this Government, the overall poverty-related attainment gap for young people who are leaving school and going on to a positive destination has reduced by 60 per cent, which is welcome news. However, let me be clear that we have much more to do to close the gap. We have had a global pandemic and a cost of living crisis, but we remain absolutely committed to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and we continue to make progress.

It is worth reflecting that up to 3,000 additional staff all over the country are now employed thanks to direct investment from the Scottish attainment challenge programme. As the headteacher at Fair Isle primary pointed out to me this morning, those extra staff are making a significant difference in our schools.

Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time. The Government's budget, which passed stage 1 yesterday, prioritises further investment in Scotland's children. For example, the budget provides for an extra £37 million to deliver on the expansion of free school meals for those in receipt of the Scottish child payment in primaries 6 and 7. All pupils in primaries 1 to 5, all children in special schools and eligible pupils in primary 6 up to secondary 6 already benefit from free school meals, which save families £400 per child per year on average. We are also the only part of the United Kingdom to provide extra support to local authorities during the school holidays, which is worth just over £21 million and is a unique investment that we will seek to continue to support.

I welcome our Scottish Green colleagues' support for our further expansion of free school meals via an additional test of change programme, which is supported by £3 million of investment, to those in receipt of the Scottish child payment in S1 to S3. We are also investing £3 million to establish a bright start breakfast fund, which children's charities have welcomed.

I am keen to assure my Green colleagues that we will continue to work with them on school uniform guidance, which we previously worked with them on. I know that the guidance is having an impact in our schools and helping to drive down costs that are associated with school uniform. I commit to working further with our Scottish Green partner colleagues, and in particular Ross Greer, on the statutory guidance and how it is being developed with our schools.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Is the cabinet secretary able to say whether such

work will include looking at the school uniform grant rising in line with inflation?

Jenny Gilruth: My understanding is that we have already looked at increasing the school clothing grant in line with inflation. I am happy to write to Monica Lennon to confirm that.

Presiding Officer, I am mindful of the time. Today, I have deliberately set out a consensual approach to working with colleagues from across the chamber, because I very much recognise the importance of doing so in a Parliament of minorities. We have reflected on the Conservatives' amendment. We agree that

"every child, no matter their background"

should have

"the best start in life",

and we agree with the call to improve education standards. That is a main reason why I decided, when I was appointed to my role, that we should rejoin some of the international tables, which the Conservative amendment refers to.

On the Labour amendment, I agree with the belief that our education system needs to

"set young people on"

a

"path to opportunities for their future",

and I whole-heartedly agree that education

"can help lift people out of poverty".

I ask members to reflect on our joint objective, which is to eradicate child poverty now and in the future. We cannot achieve that alone or in isolation; it demands collaboration across all political parties. That collaboration will drive improvement in the communities that we all represent, for the benefit of the children of Scotland. To that end, I look forward to listening to views from the parties.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the critical contribution made by education in eradicating child poverty, which is a national mission and the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government; notes recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which highlights that Scotland will see a reduction in child poverty levels in the years ahead due to Scotland-specific policies, such as the Scottish Child Payment; further notes that the Scottish Government has committed to making further progress, and agrees that there is a collective responsibility for every local authority, and educational organisation and body in Scotland, to work together with the Scottish Government to address child poverty; commends Scotland's teachers and schools for their work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, and recognises that progress has been made, and that this programme will require more funding certainty over the longer term; welcomes the further investment in tackling child poverty through education in the draft Scottish Budget for 2025-26, including within schools through the expansion

of free school meals, the uprating of the school clothing grant, continued funding for the Scottish Attainment Challenge and investment in Bright Start Breakfasts, as well as the around £1 billion investment in funded early learning and childcare and the £3.5 million investment in new skills pathways for colleges, and agrees that all MSPs across the Parliament have a responsibility to promote the interests of children and young people and to work together to share ideas and innovation to address child poverty through education.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move amendment S6M-16330.4.

15:30

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome this debate, which is being held in Government time, and I will take the opportunity to do something that is unusual when debating education—I can see smiles from the Labour benches—and that is to thank the organisations that have provided helpful briefings ahead of the debate.

We all agree that schools can help to play a crucial role in addressing child poverty. Although they cannot single-handedly solve child poverty, and should never be expected to, schools help to mitigate some of its impacts, to reduce household costs, to boost family incomes and to support children on lower incomes to learn, thrive and achieve their potential.

Much of the Government motion relates to the social security budget. The Scottish Conservatives have acknowledged and welcomed some of the progress that has been made, and we have supported many of the policies that have been taken forward by ministers, from the child payment and free school meals to the development of after-school clubs, which is another area on which we would like to see more progress.

I note the concerns from organisations that are disappointed that the pledge to provide universal free school meals for primary pupils has not been fulfilled to date. However, in the briefings, every organisation working on child poverty reduction measures and putting support in place has recognised that it is abundantly clear that we need to be able to see better delivery of more flexible childcare for parents so that they can access training opportunities or get into employment. My colleague Roz McCall has consistently raised our concerns around early years and childcare provision, as it is clear that there remains significant disparity in provision across the country. That often risks deepening inequalities and limiting parental employment opportunities and has a long-term consequence for children's development and educational outcomes.

Many of the conversations that I have had with teachers and unions since taking up the role of

shadow education secretary have focused on violence and disruptive behaviour in schools. They have also focused on the need for ministers to act and provide clear direction to restore discipline in schools, and to make sure that every classroom, wherever it might be in Scotland, is a safe learning environment for all pupils and teachers. That is why last week the Scottish Conservatives again brought forward a debate to demand action and why this week I am concerned to see that the issue is leading to teachers in East Dunbartonshire planning industrial action over the behaviour of pupils in the area. It is not the first time that school staff in Scotland have taken such a step; teachers at a school in Glasgow took strike action in 2022 over “violent and abusive” pupil behaviour. A 2024 survey of staff in Aberdeen found that many had experienced violence and more than a third had been physically assaulted. The Scottish Conservatives have brought forward debates on the issue and the Government has taken forward work on it, but it is the most pressing issue for teachers. I would welcome a full debate in Government time on how ministers plan to address the situation in our classrooms.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Miles Briggs for taking my intervention. I do not disagree in any way, shape or form with his very eloquent description of the challenges that are being faced in our classrooms. However, I invite him consider whether those challenges relate only to the poverty that some children are suffering and growing up in, or whether there are other factors that play into the violence and the environment in schools, which perhaps extend beyond the remit of today’s debate.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree. The issue transcends the debate and affects the whole pupil population. That is why, for some time and especially following the pandemic, teachers have been expressing the fact that there have been behavioural changes. Bad behaviour from all pupils is brought into the classroom and there has been a lack of action to address that. Teachers at Kirkintilloch high school claim that pupils face “no consequences” for abusive or violent behaviour. Staff say that they have repeatedly raised concerns with management but have been “gaslit”, including by being told that their lessons were not exciting enough. From today, those teachers will refuse to cover classes and will not go on trips or support activities, although the action will stop short of a strike.

Teachers and unions are losing confidence in the ability of ministers to provide leadership on this critical issue. The cabinet secretary has mentioned several times her visits to schools, and I genuinely hope that she will make her next visit to Kirkintilloch high school to listen to those concerns and see how the Government’s relationships and

behaviour in schools action plan will actually be delivered across all local authorities. We need that national leadership to make sure that the issue is addressed urgently.

Many organisations that work with care-experienced young people and young carers have identified specific problems that they face in maintaining their learning, from acknowledging specific personal situations to identifying the holistic support that they require. That is why our amendment looks towards what we would like to happen.

I believe that there is a growing consensus across the Parliament that young people who live in deprived areas are more likely to play a caring and support role for a loved one. Children who live in families that have at least one disabled member are more likely to be in poverty than children in families with no disabled member, and research tells us that young carers are more common in families that have an unemployed adult or are on a low income. That is why, as we call for in our amendment, we want ministers to undertake a review of policies to improve the identification of and support for care experienced and young carer pupils in schools, ensuring that they receive the necessary assistance to succeed in education.

Since I was elected, I have attended the young carers festival on many occasions, and heard at first hand what young carers would like. There is a blueprint, I think, to transform the options that are available to young carers that very much aligns with the work that is being undertaken through the Promise, as we have discussed with the responsible minister. I hope that the debate will see progress on that.

The debate is welcome, but ministers have sidestepped the most pressing issue that teachers and pupils currently raise, which is violence and discipline. There must be real action, which is why my amendment expresses concern over the rising level of violence in schools, which negatively impacts both attainment and wellbeing and calls on the Scottish Government to provide greater support for teachers and local authorities to tackle the issue.

I move amendment S6M-16330.4, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“acknowledges that more than a quarter of children in Scotland live in poverty; recognises that, while investment in tackling child poverty through education is important, it must be accompanied by a focus on improving educational standards; notes that, while the Scottish Government has spent £1 billion on early years and childcare, there remains a significant disparity in the availability of early years provision across Scotland, which risks deepening inequalities and limiting parental employment opportunities, and has long-term consequences for children’s development and educational outcomes; further notes with concern that education in Scotland has gone backwards in

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international rankings; acknowledges that the attainment gap in primary pupils' reading, writing, literacy and numeracy remains similar to pre-COVID-19-pandemic levels and has failed to close; regrets that the pledge to provide universal free school meals for primary pupils has not been fulfilled; expresses concern over the rising level of violence in schools, which negatively impacts both attainment and wellbeing; calls on the Scottish Government to provide greater support for teachers and local authorities to tackle this issue; further calls for a review of policies to improve the identification of and support for care experienced and young carer pupils in schools, ensuring that they receive the necessary assistance to succeed in education, and believes that the Scottish Government's main priority should be ensuring that every child, no matter their background, has the best start in life."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy to speak to and move amendment S6M-16330.3.

15:37

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. As I have said in the Parliament before, education is a great leveller and can determine a person's life chances—however, so, too, can poverty, which is why no mission is more important than tackling it. Thirty thousand more children live in poverty now than when the Scottish National Party came to power in 2007. On that, it is fair to say, we are moving in the wrong direction.

Across Scotland, in schools, colleges and universities, staff are working every day to do what they can to reduce household costs, boost family incomes and support children on lower incomes to learn, thrive and achieve their potential. The cabinet secretary has spoken fondly of some great examples this afternoon. However, for too many still, the cost of going to school adds pressure that already-stretched family budgets cannot bear. Where there are costs for uniforms, food, resources, clubs and trips, barriers can be created and opportunities stifled.

Staff in schools, colleges and universities feel compelled to do all that they can to mitigate the poverty that they see. A poll for the Educational Institute of Scotland has found that more than two thirds of teachers use their own money to buy classroom supplies and help their pupils. However, teachers, school staff and education in general cannot act alone—nor should they be expected to do so. That is why our amendment highlights broader aspects.

One such example that I do not think we can avoid mentioning today is housing and the housing emergency. This morning, new homelessness figures revealed that the number of children living in temporary accommodation in Scotland has hit record levels—up by 14 per cent in two years to 10,360. That is a national scandal. It means

nothing to say that the Government's mission is to end child poverty or to declare a housing emergency if it will not take the wide-ranging action that is needed to deal with them.

Not only does that scandal leave children without a safe or secure home and living in poverty, but it hampers their education and their life chances. Staff see the impact of that in class every day. A recent NASUWT survey found that 70 per cent of teachers said that more pupils than ever are lacking energy and concentration, and 62 per cent reported that more pupils are coming to school hungry.

I am sad to say that we see that in the education outcomes, too. The attainment gap between the most and least deprived areas of Scotland is once again widening in all areas, and, for highers, it is the widest that it has ever been. For care-experienced young people and disabled young people, it is unacceptably wide.

It is a tragedy that children's potential is being held back by their being in poverty or by their background, and the Government must take broader and further action to address that. That is why it is really disappointing that some of the things that the Scottish National Party said that it would do have not come to pass. It made promises to children that were incredibly important to their life chances, including the promise to roll out free school meals to primary 6 and primary 7 pupils.

In local authorities across the country, as I have said, there are great examples of initiatives that help to address child poverty. In our job, we have the privilege of seeing many of those initiatives at first hand. Some councils, for example, are removing the need for young people to collect documentation or pay for a passport photo when applying for their national entitlement card, which allows them to access free bus travel. Instead of families having to pay for the required proof, councils are using school records to verify young people's details, which simplifies and poverty-proofs application processes. The Government could look at rolling out that initiative across the country, and it could work with Young Scot to consider other ways to increase uptake and reduce costs for families.

The Government must also heed the calls of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, as mentioned in our amendment, and improve data collection on child poverty levels. Again, there are examples that the Government could draw on. A child poverty index has been created using data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and data on those entitled to clothing grants, free school meals and the education maintenance allowance to provide granular detail on rates of child poverty in catchment areas. That index is informing the

targeting of breakfast club provision. Rolling that out across the country could be a huge help.

Despite strong action in some areas, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has—rightly—warned that, without appropriate policy development and resources for service delivery to support local authorities,

“we are at risk of not making enough progress towards”

our child poverty targets in Scotland.

I turn to another area of education that I believe is not only mitigating the impacts of poverty but is the real route to addressing poverty in the long term: colleges. This morning, at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, we heard incredibly powerful testimony of students’ experience of poverty and about the great work that colleges in Scotland are doing to address that. Some are providing free food, help with transport and childcare and lots more.

As engines of skills, colleges have the potential to give people the tools that they need to get good work and to stay out of poverty in the longer term. However, as we also heard at the committee, the Government has created an impossible landscape for colleges, with the impact of a real-terms cut to the sector meaning that it could be very difficult for them to continue to provide such comprehensive support.

Scotland’s children and young people deserve more than that. We need them to have a Government that will tackle poverty at its roots, look at the breadth of issues and policy levers that are available to it and use them. That is what we see with action such as the Labour Government’s new deal for working people, which delivers a real living wage for more than 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots, or affordable public transport, housing support, ending problem debt and providing help and support for families across Scotland. That would change the direction of poverty in Scotland, and Scottish Labour is ready to deliver it.

I move amendment S6M-16330.3, to leave out from “, which is” to end and insert:

“; commends Scotland’s teachers and schools for their work; notes that the poverty-related attainment gap has not improved in P1 and is the widest it has ever been at Higher level; further notes that the Scottish Government’s failure to plan for the school workforce has meant that teachers are often overworked and children are unsupported; expresses its disappointment at what it sees as the Scottish National Party’s broken promise of rolling out free school meals to all P6 and P7 pupils; believes that education should set young people on the path to opportunities for their future and can help lift people out of poverty; understands that ‘Scotland’s colleges play a particularly important role in supporting learners from more deprived communities to access learning’, as described by Audit Scotland, but that the ‘financial health of the sector has deteriorated since 2021-22’; welcomes that 100,000 people in Scotland have already received a pay rise thanks to the UK Labour

administration’s New Deal for Working People; acknowledges recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the extent of child poverty in Scotland, which observed deficiencies in the key data used to calculate poverty rates and found that ‘we will need to go further to reach the 2030-31 targets’, and calls on the Scottish Government to work with the UK Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that accurate data is available for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and other organisations to accurately assess the extent of child poverty in Scotland and the impact of policy interventions on it.”

15:43

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the Government for bringing this debate to the chamber. It would be wrong to suggest that we can end child poverty through education. We can certainly mitigate it, but we cannot end it. It would be a lie to tell the children of Scotland that they can educate themselves out of poverty in a society and an economy that are structurally designed to prevent that. Far more significant changes would be required in order for them to do that.

Of course, education is important for the individual, but it cannot solve the structural problems in our society. Most children in Scotland who live in poverty are in working households. The majority of them have at least one parent or carer who has a job but is being paid such a poor wage that it is impossible for their family to live above the poverty line. We cannot educate that problem away. Someone has to do those jobs. Perhaps, on an individual basis, with greater education people can move on to a higher-paying job. However, the job that pays the poverty wage will still exist and someone will still have to do it. It is wrong that the job pays that wage in the first place.

Those are the problems that we need to tackle. That is why I am proud that, when the Greens were in government, we required any company bidding for a public sector contract in Scotland and those in receipt of grants from the Scottish Government to pay at least the real living wage to the workers who provided the service.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The member makes a really good case for the roles that education can and cannot provide. Does he welcome the fact that 200,000 Scots will get a pay rise as a result of the UK Labour Government’s new deal for working people?

Ross Greer: I absolutely do welcome the rise in the minimum wage. I would welcome it far more if the UK Government would commit to keeping the national minimum wage at least the level of the real living wage. It has not yet made that commitment. That being said, any rise in the minimum wage is to be welcomed.

I have said previously in these debates that, too often, we treat teachers as being something between social workers and miracle workers. We expect them and other school staff to solve all of society's problems. They cannot do that, but schools can play a powerful role in mitigating those problems.

I am really proud of the expansion of free school meals in Scotland, which the cabinet secretary talked about. No child should be sitting in class hungry in one of the richest countries in the history of the planet. I am proud that, through previous budget negotiations between the Greens and the SNP, we extended universal free school meals to all children in primary 4 and P5. There is an on-going extension to P6 and P7 children who receive the Scottish child payment and, as the cabinet secretary said, we have just agreed to extend the measure further, in the first eight local authorities, to pupils in secondary 1 to S3. That means that thousands of additional young people will receive free school meals.

As far as the Greens are concerned, those are steps towards the ultimate objective of universal free school meals from the early years to high school. Having visited, with other members of the Parliament, high schools in Finland, I have seen the massively beneficial effect of a universal, systematic free school meal programme not just on poverty but on attainment, behaviour and the culture of a school community.

Ultimately, tackling poverty requires a significant amount of money and public investment in programmes like free school meals. It also requires tackling the root causes of poverty. Those are not all within the remit or the powers of this Parliament and Government, but we can confront some of those whose decisions are creating that poverty in the first place. We can confront the employers who are paying their staff poverty wages that mean that children are sitting at school hungry. Those are the brave decisions that the Scottish Government can make, and I encourage it to do so. If we are to live up to that promise and to truly eradicate child poverty in Scotland—while understanding the limitations of the devolution settlement—there is certainly much more that we can do to confront those whose decisions are actively contributing to child poverty in the first place.

15:48

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I will start where Ross Greer finished off. He talked about the roles of schools and the social worker role that they have in addition to the role of education worker. It has always been the case, to some degree, that schools have played an important role in the fabric of the community and the family, but

there is no doubt that the balance has shifted in recent years. We now place a significant burden on schools and teachers. We expect them to perform miracles—and sometimes they do perform miracles; they do an outstanding job—but there is now a pressure-cooker atmosphere in some schools, with issues around behaviour, absences, more than 40 per cent of pupils having additional support needs, and family breakdowns. The reach of the school is so much greater now; therefore, the responsibility is great. I worry about our expectations of teachers, and I worry that the balance sometimes shifts too far away from the core of what schools do, which is about education.

To some extent, I disagree with Ross Greer, as I think that education is the great leveller. It gives opportunities, and I have seen it give many families great opportunities for them to succeed in life. We should not lose sight of that important role.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not the case that, at the moment, schools seem to be dealing with the very bottom layers of the hierarchy of needs—housing, food and safety—rather than the self-esteem, actualisation and dreams of children that the school system was designed to tap into?

Willie Rennie: Yes, I agree. That is not to say that the social role that the schools provide is not important, because it is incredibly important and schools do it well. The headteacher I met in Dundee took the view that her responsibilities go beyond the school gates—almost into households—as she wants to understand her families well so that she can do her job properly when she is in school.

Nevertheless, we have seen the effect of that burden on the standards and the poverty-related attainment gap in schools. I think that the minister is overstating the improvement in that area. I recognise that there is some improvement in primary schools and among school leavers, but achievement in S3 is pretty flat and the improvements in primary schools are quite small. I do not think that we should overstate the improvement that has taken place since 2016. We are supposed to be closing the poverty-related attainment gap completely by next year, but we are nowhere near that. Let us not overstate these things; let us focus on the differences that we can make.

We can have endless debates about the Scottish Qualifications Authority and so on, but that is not as relevant as the improvements that we need to make to the core of education, so we should focus on education reform. We have talked repeatedly about additional support needs, behaviour, mobile phones and the relationship with absences. All of those things are incredibly important and are fundamental to the education system. However, we also need to look at other

aspects that, to be fair, the cabinet secretary is looking at. Those aspects include the role of knowledge and the place of extracurricular activity and project work. All of those things are incredibly important, and we also need to look at the place of vocational activity. In Scotland, we have never properly cracked how we can get parity of esteem for vocational subjects. That is all part of improving overall performance. If we can improve the overall performance, we will have a chance of giving every child, no matter what their background, the chance to succeed.

I will raise one final point, which Miles Briggs also raised. The private, voluntary and independent sector is incredibly important in early years education, but we are in danger of undermining the good work that we have done by not paying the same for the private, voluntary and independent sector as we pay for council provision. Why should people get paid less for doing exactly the same job? That needs to be sorted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, should members wish to take interventions. I call Clare Haughey, who will be followed by Jeremy Balfour.

15:52

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): The First Minister declared that tackling child poverty is the national mission of this Scottish parliamentary session. Our education system, as a universal service that the vast majority of families access, is an essential component of that.

In its briefing, Save the Children states:

“The early years of childhood are golden, when development is rapid, vast and holistic.”

All parents want the best for their children, but, without support, poverty in the early years can limit young children’s potential and entrench inequalities. The poverty-related gap in children’s outcomes opens well before they set foot in a primary school classroom. Disparities in health and development take root from early childhood, with those who grow up in poverty more likely to have poorer health, educational and economic outcomes throughout their lives.

Children from low-income households are much less likely to score well on measures associated with readiness to thrive at school. Like many other countries, Scotland is still reckoning with the increasing developmental concerns following the pandemic, which can have knock-on effects on the rest of a child’s education. That is particularly true for children in the most deprived communities. Interventions focusing on early childhood can play a significant role in mitigating the impacts of

poverty by helping families to lay strong foundations for their children’s future.

The Scottish Government has taken many steps to make Scotland one of the best countries in which to experience the early years—the Scottish child payment, the baby box, best start grants, support services for parents and carers, investment in quality early learning and childcare—and is making every effort to ensure that those approaches are reaching and benefiting families.

Investment in high-quality early years services is essential for tackling child poverty, inequality and social exclusion and for breaking intergenerational cycles. There is clear evidence that high-quality early years education and childcare is beneficial to children’s development, with the strongest effects being seen among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Government has massively expanded the provision of fully funded and high-quality early learning and childcare—it has provided 1,140 hours for eligible children aged two and for all three and four-year-olds. This year’s budget includes about £1 billion of investment in early years services.

Martin Whitfield: The advice that we received from Save the Children, which Clare Haughey referenced, talks about the importance of a child’s first two years, but what support would she like to be provided to families in the period from minus three to two years?

Clare Haughey: I am not sure whether Martin Whitfield is aware of my background, but I spent about 15 years working in perinatal mental health before I came to the Parliament, so I am acutely aware of the importance not only of the months and years after a child is born but of the pre-birth era. The Scottish Government has committed to expanding childcare for younger children, but the childcare offer for three and four-year-olds is not necessarily suitable for younger children. I am sure that the work that I led when I was the minister with responsibility for that portfolio is ongoing under Ms Don-Innes.

The primary aim of the expansion of early learning and childcare is to secure improved outcomes for children in Scotland by providing them with skills and confidence to carry into school education. The significant expansion is making a direct contribution to reducing household costs, with families saving about £5,500 a year in childcare costs. It also gives parents greater opportunities to access training, employment and learning.

We know that children and families benefit when they can access the support that they need when they need it. We must maximise the availability

and consistency of key services that can have the greatest impact in eradicating poverty.

A key point in this year's programme for government was the need to continue work with local authorities to increase the uptake of early learning and childcare for eligible two-year-olds, with a particular focus on boosting uptake among families who are most at risk of poverty and connecting them to other services and resources.

Education has long been nimble in contributing to the wider tackling poverty agenda. We saw that during lockdown, when schools and nurseries rallied to support families and when colleagues worked together on the cost of the school day—and, indeed, the cost of the nursery day—by pooling and sharing sometimes small ideas that had a huge impact.

The focus on education equality is linked to wider goals to eradicate child poverty, and vice versa. The cumulative impact of action across sectors by all partners in all parts of Scotland will make the difference for children and families. That starts with the decisions that we make and the priorities that we champion in the Parliament.

15:58

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I agree with the cabinet secretary and Mr Rennie that education is a vital tool in tackling poverty. Giving our young people the best education possible gives them the skills to build a better life. A quality education system is not a luxury but an essential building block for a thriving nation such as Scotland in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, I disagree with the cabinet secretary in this regard—the impression of our education system that she gave in her speech is not the one that I get told about or that I have seen over the past number of years. We must be honest that, according to our programme for international student assessment ranking, attainment in maths is at a record low and attainment in science is not far behind. The gap in attainment between the richest and the poorest children in Scotland remains far too wide, even though the Scottish Government says that that issue is its number 1 priority.

Teachers have an almost impossible job now. As others have indicated, we are asking teachers to teach and to be, almost, social workers. We need to get back to the core. As Mr Rennie pointed out, we need teachers to be teaching and doing what they have been trained to do.

When I look at the city of Edinburgh, I see that, on one bus route, one school is doing very well and another is failing academically. That cannot be right in Scotland in the 21st century. Too often,

the Government wants to point the finger at other people. This afternoon, we have again heard that the situation is partly to do with the pandemic, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has said that the issues were there before Covid and did not just start in the past four or five years.

Jenny Gilruth: I remind Mr Balfour that the OECD described the 2022 version of the PISA statistics as the “pandemic edition” when it was published. Does he recognise that the pandemic has had a global impact on educational provision and attainment? The Government is seeking not to blame the pandemic but to set the context with which every school across the United Kingdom has had to deal, which has impacted on attainment. That is what the OECD has said. Does he accept that fact?

Jeremy Balfour: I accept it, but does the cabinet secretary accept that the OECD also tells us that the issues were there before Covid? Those underlying issues were there before 2020, when the Government was in power.

The cold, hard truth is that there is nowhere for the Government to hide from the fact that it is failing young people too often. Standards have fallen, incidents involving the use of weapons in schools have risen by 50 per cent, and staff and teachers reported 44,600 incidents of violence and abuse in 2023 alone. Too often, teachers are not teaching—they are simply doing crowd control in the classroom.

The Government desperately needs to get a grip on what is happening in our schools, and the first step is to restore our education to the great state that it used to be in. Education is a vital tool in lifting children out of poverty but, for far too long, the figures have painted a damning picture of the Government's efforts. As Pam Duncan-Glancy pointed out, more than a quarter of children live in poverty. More than 15,000 children are homeless, and we have heard today that the use of temporary accommodation has risen to a 20-year high. Those statistics should not make us feel proud but should concern us and call us to action.

The Government is very good with words but not so good at delivering real change. We need targeted support for the most vulnerable to ensure that we achieve maximum impact. Free school meals and support with school trips and school uniform could make a real difference to children's lives, not to mention giving peace of mind to hard-working parents who are struggling to make ends meet.

Education should not be a burden on families. It should be positive, and a safe place for young people to learn and develop the skills to thrive in modern Scotland. I agree with Mr Rennie that we

need to do more about vocational training, particularly for children in secondary 3 and 4 who will clearly not achieve academically. We need to find roles for them and to get them into that training. More needs to be done. We need action, because Scottish children deserve better.

16:04

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The motion notes the report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which predicts that child poverty rates in Scotland will decline by 2029 while rates in the rest of the UK are on track to rise. Recent analysis estimates that the Scottish child payment and plans to scrap the two-child benefit limit will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25. That is a major driver of what is a welcome fall. It is therefore a wee bit disappointing that some other parties fail to acknowledge the significant progress that is being made in supporting children in Scotland. Of course, that is just politics.

However, that is not to say that there is not still more to be done, because there is. I thank Save the Children for its briefing on the practical steps that can be taken to ensure that more is done. The briefing makes it clear that, if we are to make a greater impact in addressing child poverty, we must engage with children from an even earlier age. It welcomes

“efforts to increase family incomes like the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP), Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods”,

and it states:

“Parents tell us these make a big difference in being able to provide essential goods for their young children, as well as providing stimulating toys and experiences that boost development.”

Save the Children also welcomes various funds from the Scottish Government, such as the child poverty practice accelerator fund, which helps local services deliver wraparound family-based support and early learning initiatives such as the bookbug programme. Try learning when your belly is empty, or being interested in books and learning to count when you are being brought up in a cold and damp house.

We should not underestimate another point that is made in the briefing. It states:

“with 1 in 3 families with a baby under one currently living in poverty in Scotland ... more must be done to increase incomes and provide wider access to holistic family support so that all children get the start in life they deserve.”

In that regard, I highlight the success of the baby box that is offered as a welcome gift to all new babies in Scotland. The box provides essential items for the first six months of life. The uptake of the baby box has grown to around 98 per cent,

with parents sharing how useful it is in saving them money on necessary items and providing things that they might not have thought of buying themselves.

Those are welcome and successful initiatives, and I hope that the Scottish Government will commit to continuing to build on them in the context of children benefiting from free school meals.

The briefing also makes a number of interesting recommendations, including

“Increasing the Scottish Child Payment ... to £40 ... to relieve the pressures of poverty in households with young children”

and providing

“additional, targeted income through one of the five family benefits to families with a baby under one”.

It also recommends offering parental education, along with emotional and financial support, to reduce stress and empower parents to be the best that they can be. Those recommendations deserve further analysis and research to understand how they can become part of a holistic, overarching approach to addressing child poverty at every stage of a child’s development. I urge the cabinet secretary to consider the recommendations carefully in the future development of the Government’s strategy.

Although we have made significant progress, it is clear that more work remains to be done to ensure that every child in Scotland receives the start in life that they deserve. The Government must continue to empower parents with the support and resources that they need, ensuring that the crucial first months and years are the nurturing foundation that every child requires to ensure that they continue to reach their full potential as they progress through life. I am sure that that is the direction that is being pursued.

16:08

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Presiding Officer,

“Growing up in one of Scotland’s most deprived communities is likely to put a person at the bottom of the class and, in too many instances, into an early grave.”— [Official Report, 2 June 2016; c 47.]

That is what I said to the Parliament in my very first speech back in 2016. Tragically, child poverty and inequality remain a scandal of epic proportions in our country. In Scotland today, one in three families with a baby under the age of one are living in poverty. The cabinet secretary rightly talked about our shared aspiration to eradicate child poverty, but that is more than an aspiration; it is our legal and moral obligation to babies,

children and young people in every corner of Scotland.

Ahead of the debate, the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland highlighted the crucial role that schools play in addressing child poverty. Although they cannot single-handedly solve child poverty and should never be expected to do so, our schools mitigate some of its worst impacts by helping to reduce household costs, maximising income and supporting children from lower-income households to learn, thrive and reach their potential. I therefore say a huge thank you to the teachers and education workforce of Scotland for the amazing work that they do.

We know that increasing family incomes is key to reducing child poverty. I am pleased that it is a priority for the UK Labour Government, but there is more that we need to do in this Parliament and elsewhere. Save the Children, which has been mentioned by other speakers, has highlighted that the poverty-related attainment gap in education is already well established long before a child starts school. It is therefore important that the Scottish Government does all that it can to expand publicly funded early learning and childcare from the end of paid maternity leave, and that we do not get complacent about the Scottish child payment and its uptake. We need to simplify it so that as many families as possible who are entitled to it get it, particularly because of its link to accessing free school meals.

In the casework that is keeping me busy at the moment, I am seeing far too many children and young people who are not getting the support that they need. As Martin Whitfield said, it is not always because of poverty, but there is an intersection with poverty. Families are struggling with poverty and low incomes, and children are waiting for the correct pathways around autism, ADHD and access to speech and language therapy. What I see in my inbox and advice surgeries is childhoods evaporating as people wait for support that comes far too late. We have to do better.

In South Lanarkshire, which is part of my Central Scotland region, more than one in five children are living in relative poverty. I have been asked to ask the cabinet secretary what additional provision will be put in place for young people in S5 and S6, as EMA has not changed for more than 20 years, remaining at £30 a week, with low eligibility criteria. As I said in the chamber yesterday in an intervention on Ross Greer, I welcome the commitment to expand access to free school meals. However, we are already a long way behind and we have to speed that up. As the cabinet secretary knows, we have discussed the importance of young people's voices being at the heart of that.

We have learned a harsh lesson in this Parliament about setting targets and not living up to people's expectations. We missed our climate targets because of delay and inaction, and we must not do that when it comes to the targets for reducing child poverty. We have the evidence and, I think, the political consensus. We just have to get on and do it.

16:12

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): We know that children and young people do not exist in isolation. They are directly and indirectly affected by their parents or carers and by economic stability or instability. Children from wealthier families often perform better in various aspects of life, including education, sport and overall wellbeing. That playing field must be levelled. I want to see a more equal and fair society and, for that to happen, we must support families to break cycles of poverty.

The SNP Scottish Government recognises that, and I am delighted that its commitment to eradicating child poverty is being matched with bold action. Thanks to the work of the Scottish Government, Scotland is set to be the only part of the UK to see a decline in child poverty rates in the coming years, with a growing gap between child poverty rates in Scotland and in Labour-run England and Wales.

The draft Scottish budget for next year will develop the systems necessary to, in effect, scrap the two-child cap in 2026. That decision by the SNP Government will lift a further 15,000 children out of poverty. As someone who has first-hand experience of childhood poverty, I can tell members that the impact that that will have on the lives of those children cannot be overestimated. It is about not only full bellies and warm homes but providing equal opportunity and an environment in which to thrive and succeed.

Education has a dominant role to play in all of that. Under the SNP Government, Scotland is the only part of the UK to have delivered 1,140 hours of universally funded early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. That childcare provision saves families an average of £5,500 per child per year, but—crucially—it helps with children's development and supports parents to stay in or take up work or learning.

In its draft budget, the Scottish Government proposes to provide approximately £1 billion of investment to continue the provision of 1,140 hours of ELC next year. For children in school, it proposes to provide money for best start breakfasts and the expansion of breakfast clubs across Scotland, as well as £37 million to expand

free school meal provision to P6s and P7s who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment. That builds on the delivery of universal free school meals to all P1 to P5 pupils in Scotland.

Another thing that the SNP Government is delivering is pupil equity funding. That is part of the Scottish attainment challenge, which is a programme to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people who are impacted by poverty. Pupil equity funding, which is worth more than £1.8 million per year to headteachers in East Kilbride alone, gives headteachers the spending power to decide how to best close the poverty-related attainment gap for their pupils.

On top of those investments, the Scottish Government will provide a £186.5 million boost to local authorities to increase teacher numbers, as well as £29 million extra in funding to recruit, train and develop the education workforce to support pupils with additional support needs.

It is estimated that the Scottish Government's policy package will keep 100,000 children out of poverty this year. The draft budget for 2025-26 sets out new measures, such as the starting of the work to scrap the cruel two-child limit to support the national mission of eradicating child poverty.

Education is crucial to that goal, so I welcome the expansion of free school meals, the continuation of pupil equity funding and the provision of 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare. I know that those policies make a real difference to my constituents and help to ensure that children get the best start in life.

16:17

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

When it comes to tackling poverty, there are a number of different levels that we can talk about. Some members have talked about the Scottish child payment. There is no doubt that it has had an impact. Others have talked about removing the two-child cap. There is absolutely no doubt that that would have an impact. There are many issues at different levels of government.

In the context of education, I want to focus on the local level. Although schools, early years centres and nurseries are not in a position to bring an end to child poverty, they can provide a lot of support for children who, sadly, are living in poverty. There is absolutely no doubt that poverty has a devastating impact on the ability of a child to achieve his or her full potential. That is why, at the local level, we need to come together and work as best we can.

The theme of partnership is one that COSLA talks about, and it is one that I want to talk about. We need to have meaningful partnership—that

involves people coming to the table as equals—between the Scottish Government, the UK Government, local government, the third sector and the voluntary sector, whose role is key. An example of that is the Big House Multibank, which was established in Fife and has now been rolled out in many parts of the UK. It was set up as a partnership, with councils, local businesses and large national businesses all contributing. If members were to visit one of the warehouses that it has established in Lochgelly, they would find masses of products there, from shoes to food to cleaning materials—it has every domestic product that anyone would need.

However, having all those products and distributing them are different things. How do you reach the people who are in greatest need? I feel that we are sometimes unable to do that. The way to do it is through schools, so that teachers are involved. Schools can contact the big hoose project and tell it what they need; the council and the voluntary sector then provide support, and the goods are sent out to schools and social workers. That type of approach at the local level is the way to do it.

However, I think that we all acknowledge that schools alone cannot tackle poverty. I remember many years ago, when I was a councillor, visiting Benarty primary school, which is in your constituency, Deputy Presiding Officer. The headteacher and the teachers brought in bread in the mornings and made toast and tea. The headteacher said to me that no child would learn well if they were sitting there hungry the whole morning. Since those days, thankfully, a lot more investment has gone in and there are many more breakfast clubs. Fair Isle primary school in Kirkcaldy, which I also used to visit when I was a councillor, has been a leader not just in recent times; it has done masses of good work over many years.

Again, it is about partnership. The Scottish Government does not have all the answers, and local authorities might not have all the answers. Local authorities and health authorities have to, by statute, produce a report on what they are doing to tackle child poverty; they then have to produce reports and updates on how they are delivering on that. There is willingness out there, but we need to understand partnership better and to work in partnership better to support the amazing school staff and all the volunteers who do so much in our communities to lighten the impact of poverty. That would be a good start for the Scottish Government: partnership.

16:21

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Before I became a member of the Scottish

Parliament, I was a councillor on Aberdeenshire Council and sat on the education and children's services committee. In that role, as in this role, I would often hear the words "attainment gap" being wielded as a political weapon, but an important part of the phrase was left out—the crucial part. The first part of "poverty-related attainment gap" would be omitted, so I am glad that we are focusing on that part today.

Poverty is not just a statistic—it is a lived experience. It is gnawing hunger. It is the humiliation of not having clean clothes or of having to wear ill-fitting clothes. It is the shame of missing out on school trips. It is the anxiety of knowing that you might not go home to a warm meal that evening. A decent mattress to sleep on in a room of your own, or having a space for privacy, can seem like luxury to many children.

Education alone cannot lift a child out of poverty when they are trapped in a cycle of deprivation. For a child who is cold, hungry or struggling with the weight of any family hardship, focusing on learning can feel absolutely impossible. How can children concentrate when they have not eaten since the previous day?

I have spoken with families who often feel judged because their child has a phone at school and it is known that they get support. People ask, "Why do they have a mobile phone?" It might be their only connection to a parent who works night shift or their only means of accessing vital services. Poverty is not just about income—it is about dignity and choices that people do not have the luxury to make. We need to ensure that we eradicate judgment, and the shame and stigma that are associated with it.

That is why tackling child poverty must be interwoven with every relevant Scottish Government policy. I commend the action that the Scottish Government is taking to mitigate the damaging policies that are being imposed by Westminster.

I am frustrated by the cognitive dissonance that I see from other parties over and over again. Do Opposition members think that 14 years of Tory austerity has improved our education system? No, it has not. Austerity was imposed by the Tories and is now backed by Labour, which has also imposed national insurance hikes. What do members think that will do to our education system? We have to work together on this, but Opposition members have to stop coming to the Scottish Government and asking it to sort out the mess that both the Labour and Tory parties have made at Westminster. I am asking those members to join the dots.

We also have to look beyond the symptoms of what we hear about bad behaviour in our schools

and pay attention to the causes. We must be careful and sensitive in how we have that debate. We do not want to stigmatise children with additional support needs, nor do we want to stigmatise teachers and make the public think that teachers are not coping in their jobs. There are sensitivities around behaviour in schools, and it is important that the issue is not used as a political weapon.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation projects that child poverty will decline in Scotland while rising in the rest of the UK. The Scottish child payment has, as we have heard, been called "game-changing", and that is for a reason—because it is.

In the budget, we are investing in education as a tool not just for learning, but for liberation from poverty, by expanding free school meals, increasing the school clothing grant and investing in bright start breakfasts. Those are not just numbers on a spreadsheet—they are policies that change lives for young carers and for children who are already, before they even get to school, having to administer medication to siblings or to provide emotional support to struggling parents. Our social security system recognises that reality and provides direct financial support, and people who receive that support should not be stigmatised for it.

There are those who say that benefits are a waste of money, or insinuate that people take advantage of the system. However, we should be clear that the real waste is the cost of inaction. Studies show that childhood poverty impacts on brain development, academic achievement and future earnings. The longer a child is trapped in poverty, the harder it becomes for them to escape it. Investment in poverty reduction is an investment in education, in health and in future prosperity.

Barnardo's Scotland is working with hundreds of schools and has documented the real impact of poverty on participation in education. It highlights children who are skipping meals so that younger siblings can eat, and parents who are unable to afford uniforms.

We must also acknowledge the real financial commitment that the Government is making through investing around £3 billion per year in its mission to eradicate child poverty, address the cost of living crisis and break the cycle of poverty. That funding supports measures—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adam, can you bring your remarks to a close, please? You are over your time.

Karen Adam: I apologise—I am going over my time. I am very impassioned by the subject, Deputy Presiding Officer.

In conclusion, I simply say to Opposition members that we have a moral duty to act, and if they truly care about the attainment gap, they must care about poverty first. We should not stop until every child in Scotland has the future that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:27

Ross Greer: In opening, the cabinet secretary talked about the work that she and I did together over 2023 and 2024 on school uniform policy. I am really proud of that work. It relates to the point that Monica Lennon made in an intervention—that it is important to keep the school clothing grant in line with inflation. Over recent years, we have faced constant demands to increase the clothing grant beyond inflation.

However, we realised from our work that that was not helping families so much as it was continuing to line the pockets of school uniform providers, which had managed to create little monopolies for themselves across the country. That was a result of school uniform policies that specified only one provider, so a family could not shop around for the cheapest product, and included needlessly specific requirements—for example, on braid on blazers and very specific physical education kit. There were also gender rules—the classic example was schools that said that girls had to wear skirts and boys had to wear trousers, when the skirt that the school had decided on was more expensive than the trousers.

There was an easy solution to that, which was to create the guidance document that effectively caps the cost of school uniforms. That document was published last year, and I am really proud of it. There is one particular line that I wrote pretty much at the start the process and which survived umpteen redrafts and was at the core of what we were trying to achieve—certainly, from the Greens' perspective. It says that a school, in setting its uniform policy, should set a policy whereby it is possible for a child and their family to get every item of the uniform that the school says they need for the year, and a reasonable number of spares, for no more than the amount that their local council gives in a school uniform grant.

As the cabinet secretary said, that is already having a huge impact for families across the country. I urge any council that has not yet adopted the guidance as being, in effect, mandatory to do so. I am glad that the cabinet secretary has said in the debate that we can move forward with further discussions to put the guidance on a statutory footing, which I think is necessary.

There is much more that we can do to poverty proof our schools. As I said earlier, and as a number of colleagues have said, we cannot solve the scourge of child poverty in our schools, but we certainly should not be making it any worse. There are many examples, big and small, of how to do that.

Some things have been mentioned in Parliament before, including non-uniform days that have mandatory charitable donations alongside them, which were causing some families a huge amount of distress. I remember that during the previous parliamentary session the Education and Skills Committee took evidence from people who highlighted that that was having a much worse impact in wealthier areas. Families who were not wealthy in such communities were finding that those days were causing challenges for them that many others in the school community did not face. Those events simply drew attention to their children and put a spotlight on the fact that they came from lower-income families. There were easy solutions: non-uniform days did not have to be banned, but the charitable donation that usually went alongside them could be made not mandatory. Certainly, children should not be in the position of being sent home because they are unable to make a charitable donation, but have turned up in non-uniform clothes anyway.

Other ideas include placing family-income advisers in schools. That idea has been massively successful in general practice surgeries in Glasgow and in the NHS Lothian area. We know that there is a huge amount of money in uncollected entitlements: there is support that families are entitled to but are not aware of or cannot, for whatever reason, access. For many families, schools are the only part of the state that they view as safe spaces, because they are places where they can go to interact with people whom they trust. Building wraparound support as part of a school has proved to be incredibly successful in areas that have trialled it. I would certainly like there to be much more of that approach.

It is clear from the debate that we all have a huge appreciation for the school staff who go above and beyond every day to ensure that children who are living in poverty are supported, and to ensure that they do whatever they can to mitigate or, if possible, to eradicate that. However, they should not need to do that.

As I said earlier, poverty is man made, and it can be unmade. We should have more debates in the chamber in which we are honest about the causes of child poverty in Scotland, including about decisions such as those that Karen Adam highlighted, that were made by the previous UK Government, particularly about welfare.

We can end child poverty in Scotland, and not just with the powers of the Scottish Parliament and the Government. It would involve co-operation between the Scottish and UK Governments.

Any man-made injustice can be unmade. That is what we should be dedicating ourselves to this afternoon.

16:32

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): This has genuinely been a fascinating debate. I welcome the cabinet secretary's remarks in her opening speech about the consensual nature of debate that she was seeking. I will absolutely join her on any trip to a school. Of course, that reminds me, as it possibly reminds her, of our entries in the register of members' interests relating to our former profession.

The debate has highlighted how poverty affects children, and the responsibility of schools to challenge that. I am grateful to the members who took interventions. I want to return to the hierarchy of needs: I think that our schools are being expected to fulfil needs in much lower sections of that pyramid than previously. I echo many other members in my thanks to teachers, education staff and, indeed, parents, for the work that they do to provide support for our young people and children. One of the things that we need to address is the expectation on schools. It is important that we consider whether they are filling a gap created by the absence of services and support in other areas.

The cabinet secretary and many other members highlighted the Save the Children briefing for the debate. I echo my thanks to the charity, because it has highlighted something that we are aware of, but do not trumpet enough. The evidence is absolutely clear that we need to do more to ensure that children from poorer backgrounds are not behind from day 1, which a number of contributions have highlighted. We have talked about the need to widen the free school meals programme and the consensual approach that is being sought on that.

There are a significant number of areas in which we agree, but to pick up on Alex Rowley's contribution, the approach must involve partnership and working with the UK Government, Scottish Government, local authorities, our communities and the third sector and charities that are doing so much, because the solution is not going to be the same all around the country. The solution in our rural areas is very different from that in the central belt and, depending on the area, solutions will be different even within our cities.

To pick up on what Miles Briggs said about the need for flexible childcare, it is important that we

look at whether support in the pre-school period works for both the child and the family, who frequently face challenges. Although I understand that the cabinet secretary may not want to go there, I welcome, in passing, the multiyear funding that has been announced with regard to the Family Fund.

On the flipside of that, two other pieces of news arrived today. First, there is the very challenging "Oversight Board for the Promise: report THREE February 2025", which I assume the Government will be making a statement about in the near future. I do not expect the cabinet secretary to go there now, but we are a long way from where we need to be.

Secondly, the housing statistics were raised today, initially by Jeremy Balfour in an intervention. If children do not have shelter, they are not going to learn. As Karen Adam rightly said, children might go to school to seek safety, security, warmth and food. Our schools have a bigger responsibility towards our young people, but if only schools can provide such support, we are in a desperately dangerous position.

There are a number of contributions that I wanted to pick up on, because there has been a lot said in the debate, from Ross Greer's thoughtful opening speech about mitigating circumstances to Willie Rennie's decision to take the debate forward after that—almost as if they were working in unison. However, given the time left, I will pick up a few important points.

We agree that education is an incredible tool to lift people out of poverty in the long term, but what is more important today is for each child to be able to participate well in school and wider education without suffering the adverse impacts that poverty places on them. That means having parents who are in well-paid work and who support them so that they do not go to school hungry, and having community centres and youth groups where they can go after school to continue to be safe and supported.

It means having an education system that supports young people to achieve, regardless of their background, where they are measured by that achievement, from their point of view. It means having excellent and available early years provision, where skilled practitioners are resourced to provide early intervention—we have talked about how important that is.

There is no better example than the fact that that is encompassed in the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, which sets out the expectation that young people and children can have of the Government, this Parliament and local authorities—of emanations of the state. We

are being challenged on one of the most basic human rights that our young people have.

The Government has a very challenging record on child poverty. The child homelessness figures and the number of children in temporary accommodation have hit record highs, which is shameful. We are failing to deliver on the issue and sort it. We are failing on the poverty-related attainment gap, failing to fund local government and failing to meaningfully reform education.

There is a very old saying: poverty is the thief of dreams. Given that legislation says that we must address the issue, the question for the Government and the Parliament is, how long are we going to allow that thief to steal from our young people?

16:38

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

The SNP promised to transform Scottish education; it was their number one priority for many years. The language may have changed from, “Judge me on my record in education” and “Closing the attainment gap,” to, “Addressing child poverty through education” and, “The poverty-related attainment gap,” but it adds up to the same thing: a supposed priority focus on education to help address societal issues.

So, what has changed in the education of Scotland’s children over the past 18 years? International rankings tell us a troubling story, with Scotland’s PISA scores in maths and science at record lows. The attainment gap remains almost stagnant, with outcomes for the poorest pupils remaining virtually unchanged. ASN pupils are not currently adequately supported in the classroom. Care-experienced pupils are still routinely excluded from school—Mr Whitfield mentioned the oversight report, which I am sure we will get into later. Children’s mental health is not being supported and child and adolescent mental health services targets have never been met—not once. Deaf students are being failed, with a continual reduction in the number of British Sign Language teachers. Teachers are experiencing violence in the classroom daily. Teacher shortages and cuts to vital school support are failing all our children, particularly the very children who need help most.

If those are the results of the SNP’s focus on education, what can we expect for things that are lower on the agenda? How can the SNP Government claim to be in pursuit of ending child poverty when too many of our children are continually left behind by an education system that is inadequate in giving them the skills that they need to succeed in life? Frankly, Scotland’s

children need an education system that can help to lift them up, not put them down. That is what education is supposed to be about: giving all our children, no matter their start in life, the best possible chance at taking the opportunities that a good education can give them, whether it be knowledge-based or vocational. The truth is that education might only be part of the Scottish Government’s mission to eradicate child poverty, but it remains pivotal to the life chances of our young people.

I echo Monica Lennon’s thanks to all the people who work in our education sector. They deserve a round of applause. On the housing issues that Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted, I will add that the number of children living in bed and breakfasts has more than doubled—that is a stark example of how this issue does not stand in the area of education alone.

I welcome the contribution from the cabinet secretary regarding PEF and Fair Isle primary school—it is so important that we hear from children about their experience in our schools, and I am also up for a visit any time. I also echo the request from Martin Whitfield on publishing PEF data.

Willie Rennie and Jeremy Balfour talked about a shift in balance made by schools and teachers over the years towards doing more, which is taking them away from their core function. I think that it is more about balance between children, schools, the Government, community and families than about the partnership that Alex Rowley highlighted. The balance is skewed, and we have to bring it back.

In my last few minutes, I will bang the drum again for the excellent work done by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on parental employment, which again highlighted that this issue cannot stand alone. Its work highlighted how well the process could work not only to take children out of poverty but to support single parents and parents in low-paid work. The evidence taken by the committee was clear that work must be done to fix three areas that are holding people back from taking an avenue out of poverty for themselves: childcare, transportation and upskilling.

How can the Government claim to be eradicating child poverty if it does not address all those issues? It is not a failing of Government to help people to help themselves. Not only is the Government refusing to address this issue; we are moving backwards on it. I have previously mentioned that Fife College had to close a fully subscribed course at its Kirkcaldy campus because the bus timetable changed, and no one could get to the class. I highlighted the issue when UHI Perth was forced to close the on-site childcare

facility because of funding cuts to colleges. If early years funding did what it was meant to do, that would not have happened. Yes, I am mentioning early years funding again. Audit Scotland's report on early learning and childcare states:

"This is a flagship policy which underpins broader ambitions to reduce child poverty and to support economic transformation. Around £1 billion is invested in it annually. But the sector is fragile."

As Willie Rennie highlighted, there is a big funding disparity with the PVI sector, which is a big issue that must be addressed. The Government is so happy to highlight the £1 billion of investment, but it is not getting it right. The offer is so disjointed across Scotland that parents face a postcode lottery, and working parents are penalised the most.

The Government's motion was another round of back-slapping and self-congratulatory rhetoric. I recognise the proposals that have been made in the budget and the moves towards eradicating poverty through education; however, we have heard before of record investment, policy after policy and plan after plan. The results speak for themselves. The Government may want to eradicate poverty through education but, unfortunately, the report card is coming back with a resounding "must do better".

16:45

Jenny Gilruth: I thank members for their contributions. I am sorry that Roz McCall felt that the Government's motion was self-congratulatory. The intention was to have a wide-ranging debate with members across the chamber, to hear their solutions to the challenges and to recognise the progress that has been made thus far. I was not clear from the debate which solutions were forthcoming from Conservatives. However, we may come to that.

As the First Minister has made clear, eradicating child poverty is the top priority for the Scottish Government, and we will leave no stone unturned in seeking to achieve that goal. It is the focus of the entire Government, across every portfolio, as has been mentioned today.

I will speak to a number of points that were made in what was, in general, a positive debate, with suggestions from across the chamber. Miles Briggs raised a number of issues pertaining to behaviour, which we have discussed at length in private and debated at length in the chamber. The Government has taken a range of measures on that. I heard calls for leadership, and I point to the Government's national action plan, which was drafted in consultation with our teaching trade unions and COSLA. I am sure that Mr Briggs will have heard on BBC Radio Scotland this morning

the views of Mike Corbett of the NASUWT, who said that the Scottish Government had shown leadership in relation to the national action plan but that local authorities had to adapt those policies and put them into practice in our schools.

Mr Briggs cited a specific school. I am always happy to visit schools, which in my role I do weekly. Perhaps he needs to reflect on my contribution about Fair Isle primary school's nurture base, which has been enabled to exist as a result of extra funding from the Government. That funding is making a difference to behaviour and relationships in that school. The pupils and teachers at that school were keen to tell me that there are consequences there. We often hear in the chamber that there are no consequences in our schools, but that is not the case. I invite Mr Briggs to join me on a visit back to Fair Isle primary school—or any primary school, particularly in relation to the pupil equity fund. He is very welcome to do so.

Miles Briggs: The teachers at Kirkintilloch high school say that there are no consequences for abusive and violent behaviour, which is why they are striking. We should go to that school and ask why it is not the case that every local authority is working together on a national plan to end violence and misbehaviour in school. That is the challenge that I set to the Scottish Government. It is not okay to say that things are okay in one school in one council area. Every school should be ending such behaviour, and we need to make sure that that happens.

Jenny Gilruth: I do not disagree with Mr Briggs. He cites a specific local dispute, which is a matter for the relevant local authority. I am more than happy to engage with him on the specifics of that school, but it is for that school and local authority to respond to that dispute. The Government can set national parameters but, as Mike Corbett from the NASUWT made clear this morning on the radio, it is for the local authority to enact how that works in our classrooms.

More broadly, we have heard comments from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. I come to Pam Duncan-Glancy's points on that. Chris Birt, the foundation's associate director for Scotland, has stated:

"we need ... concerted efforts from UK Government, including on social security, to deliver the better society free from poverty that our children deserve."

I hope that Ms Duncan-Glancy will reflect on the range of policies that hamper our efforts to eradicate child poverty—for example, the benefit cap, the bedroom tax and the rates of universal credit, to which Karen Adam alluded, I think.

The Scottish Government has been forced to mitigate that landscape. However, that is not the

point of this Parliament—we should not have to use significant amounts of taxpayers' money to mitigate the effect of decisions that were made elsewhere.

Ross Greer was quite right to talk about expectations of my previous profession. I would extend that to the role of the school more broadly, which has changed in recent times. That is exactly the point that Mr Rennie was getting at—that our expectations of schools have grown, particularly in recent years. Perhaps I should reflect that that is a result of additionality coming from the Government and expectations about the role of schools in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, engaging with families and having a broader locus in the wider community. What we expect from schools has undoubtedly changed. I was trying to make the point that our approach to school funding perhaps needs to better understand and reflect that.

I do not think that I have heard a single member say that pupil equity funding is not something that we should have in our schools, and it is good that we seem to have cross-party consensus on that. However, we all need to consider, particularly as we look to the future, how we can better resource our schools and our classrooms at the chalkface, because although that funding is making a difference, the situation is still challenging in our schools. I have reflected on that today.

Willie Rennie spoke of the role of knowledge in relation to curriculum for excellence. We very much share a view on that, and that work is being driven forward by the broader curriculum improvement cycle. That is being led by our classroom teachers, which lends it significant credibility.

We heard a range of contributions about the role of ELC provision. Clare Haughey spoke about the transformative impact of the 1,140 hours of childcare policy, which has been rolled out nationally. She is also right to talk about the need for improved uptake, particularly by two-year-olds who qualify for free ELC. In recent years, that figure has increased—it is up to 59 per cent nationally. However, there is too much variation locally, and the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise is working with our local authorities on a targeted approach to better support that work.

Jeremy Balfour spoke about schools and performance, and we had an exchange about the OECD's commentary on the impact of the pandemic. I have been fairly candid in accepting that there are challenges to take forward and, as I said in my opening speech, we can debate the reasons for those, but I did not hear Mr Balfour provide solutions or set out how we can drive further progress. He talked about the importance

of free school meals, but I do not recall his party coming to the Government with a proposal for the budget to support the universal roll-out of that policy. If that had happened, there would have been engagement with me, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, but I am not aware that such advances were made.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer. Monica Lennon raised a range of issues. She spoke about her first speech back in 2016, when we were both first elected to the Scottish Parliament. I recall her speech, and I know how passionately she feels about eradicating child poverty. Today, she spoke about additional support needs. It is worth recounting—I think that I had this same exchange with Ms Duncan-Glancy yesterday—that significant additional investment is being put into additional support needs through the budget. That additional £29 million does not sit on its own; it is in addition to the £926 million that the Government is investing in additional support needs.

Monica Lennon spoke about challenges in relation to diagnosis, which I accept. She will understand that some of the issues relate to health, but I work on a cross-portfolio basis with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. It is also worth saying that children in schools do not need a formal diagnosis in order to access support, so they should be able to access support in our schools. We will continue to work with COSLA on that, because I recognise the challenge.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The cabinet secretary will know that, although a diagnosis is not required, it is important for families to have support and a diagnosis. To get a co-ordinated support plan, which gives children and young people rights at school, the input of a third party, such as another service, is needed. Pupils cannot get such a plan without a diagnosis.

Jenny Gilruth: The member will realise that co-ordinated support plans have a statutory footing. In addition, pupils can access an individual support plan. We have seen their use increase in recent years, and many pupils have such plans, which can be put in place without a CSP.

The associated action with the CSPs is part of the additional support for learning action plan. Last year, I provided an update on that to Parliament and to the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Karen Adam's speech, which was one of the strongest contributions from SNP back benchers. She was quite right when she said that poverty is not just about income but about dignity. We need to make

sure that we eradicate the shame that is far too often associated with poverty.

Karen Adam also spoke about the cognitive dissonance in relation to funding, which was the point that I was trying to make in relation to the Government's efforts being hampered by policies from elsewhere. I hope that parties that have a locus elsewhere may be able to use any influence that they have to encourage their—*[Interruption.]* I hear some laughter from the Labour back benches, which I think is somewhat telling. Members may be able to encourage their colleagues to reflect again on the perceived wisdom, particularly from the Labour Party—

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The cabinet secretary must conclude.

Jenny Gilruth: —about continuing a range of austerity measures that are harming children in Scotland before the Scottish Government has acted.

In general, the debate has been positive. It is an opportunity for us all to come together to work towards the future. After the significant challenges in recent years, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, there is now an opportunity before us to make meaningful and lasting change for the people of Scotland.

I implore members across the chamber to embrace that opportunity, to work constructively with the Government and to play their part in delivering that change, because only together can we deliver a vibrant and thriving Scotland and eradicate child poverty once and for all.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on addressing child poverty through education.

Urgent Question

16:56

Health and Wellbeing Census (Third-party Access)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has any data showing the number of children or parents who were aware that results from the health and wellbeing census could be accessed by third-party researchers.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government is not collecting health and wellbeing census data from local authorities. That data was gathered once, between October 2021 and June 2022. Any survey or questionnaire collecting personal data must comply with the key principles set out in data protection legislation, which include the principles of fairness, lawfulness and transparency.

Local authorities were provided with guidance and materials to produce privacy notices to fully explain the purpose of the survey and how the data would be used. Local authorities were responsible for the distribution of the privacy notices to parents and carers in advance of the survey. The Scottish Government therefore does not hold that data.

Meghan Gallacher: Three years ago, the Scottish National Party was embroiled in scandal over the shameful school sex survey. The questionnaire was sent to 130,000 children, some as young as 14 years old, and they were asked highly intrusive and inappropriate questions, including to detail their sexual experiences.

Most parents were not even aware of what their children were being asked. The letter sent out to parents, informing them of the survey, did not explain about the detailed questions on sexual history, mental health and other sensitive topics. As the SNP adopted an opt-out model for parents and pupils, many children were exposed to that inappropriate questionnaire without the active consent of their parents.

Cabinet secretary, do you think that it is ever okay to ask a 14-year-old questions about their sexual history without the consent of their parents?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Always speak through the chair, please.

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise the strength of feeling in relation to this topic. It is worth recounting to Parliament that the data was collected on one occasion only, between 2021 and 2022. As Ms Gallacher will be well aware, only 16

local authorities—that I am aware of—took part in the gathering of the data. It is important that the Government reflects on that, and we need to work with our local authorities on how we can improve the data collection.

Ms Gallacher raised the issue of parental consent. As I set out in my original answer, the issue of parental consent should have been communicated via schools—because that is how our local authorities operate in Scotland, in terms of their responsibilities—and that consent should have been sought. Even when parental consent was given, young people had the option of opting out, and many did. We need to reflect on that, too.

Ms Gallacher asked a broader question about the holding of data. As I said in my original answer, the Scottish Government is not collecting the data and we have not collected it since June 2022. As Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, I have also taken a decision to pause how we collect the data. I think that it is important that we reflect on that.

I am sorry—I see that the member does not have a particularly happy face right now. I would have thought that she would welcome the Government's approach, because it has been her approach throughout. *[Interruption.]* I can hear her chuntering from a sedentary position. I would have thought that the member would welcome that approach from the Government, which shows that we are listening.

I have discussed these concerns directly with the chief statistician, and I will meet with him this evening, following the conclusion of this meeting of the Parliament. I have been reassured that, in future discussions, he will take appropriate steps that reflect the strength of feeling about collecting this type of information.

Meghan Gallacher: The cabinet secretary does not get it. Parents are furious about this. They are furious about the way that the Scottish Government has acted—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: —in putting out the school sex survey to local government without parental consent and without parents knowing. It has been revealed that that sensitive data, which the Scottish National Party promised would be kept confidential, is being advertised to third-party researchers. That is a blatant betrayal of trust and raises concerns about the protection of our children's privacy. Will the cabinet secretary please explain why that data has been shared and provide assurances that the shameful decision to share it will be reversed and never repeated?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise the strength of the member's feelings on the issue, but I do not recall her asking to meet me to discuss it. She also needs to reflect that the data was gathered once, in 2021 and 2022, and it is now 2025. If she would like to meet me to discuss her concerns, I am more than happy to do that. I have given her an assurance today that the survey has been paused at my behest. I have also given her my commitment that I am engaging with the chief statistician on this. I hope that she will recognise that I am taking direct action in relation to the concerns that she has raised today.

On the broader issue that she raised in relation to data, the data was not gathered by the Scottish Government; it was gathered by local authorities, and only 16 took part.

The Presiding Officer: We have several requests for supplementary questions. We have a time allocation for this item, so concise questions and responses would be helpful.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): For the sake of reassurance, will the cabinet secretary confirm that, although councils were responsible for opt-out procedures, participants in the survey are not identifiable?

Jenny Gilruth: I have been assured by officials that robust ethics and privacy controls are in place to prevent any young person from being identifiable from any results of the statistical and research work. The health and wellbeing census data, which is held by the Scottish Government, is anonymised, and I have been assured that we do not have access to information that would enable the direct identification of any pupil. The Scottish Government also ensures that any results produced from analysing the data do not enable an individual child to be identified. I hope that that provides the member with the reassurance that she has sought today.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): There is great concern about this, principally from a data point of view. The assertion that individuals cannot be identified is disputed by those who say that there is other information in the public domain and that, if the data is matched together, we can identify children, particularly in small schools.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child categorically states that children have a right to have their opinions heard and taken seriously. The Information Commissioner's Office categorically states that opt-out consent is not consent: consent must be opt-in. The Scottish Government requested the data and the local authorities took the census and fed it into schools, where teachers then requested that young people and children complete it. There is a disparity of power between a young person in a class and

their teacher if they are invited to complete something.

I heard what the cabinet secretary said, and I welcome the suspension of any further work on this, but can she answer the question about how an opt-out consent was the recommended way to obtain consent from children in relation to the data that was collected in 2021-22?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises some important points. In the initial part of his question, he made a point about the views of children and young people, which are hugely important. The health and wellbeing census helps us to respond to issues that children and young people are concerned about. Throughout the pandemic, issues were raised by the Children's Parliament, the Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and YoungScot that consistently indicated that children and young people were concerned about their own health and wellbeing and that of others around them. That is important.

More broadly, the member made a point about opting out. As I understand it, parents were communicated with about the responsibilities of local authorities and, if parents gave their consent, a young person could opt out. They were not forced to do this; they were able to opt out.

I see that Mr Whitfield is shaking his head at me. I am more than happy to write to him on the issue. I have paused that data collection for the reasons that have been rehearsed by Ms Gallacher, and I am meeting the chief statistician this evening. I would be more than happy to write to Mr Whitfield with a fuller response on his specific points.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The introduction to the survey, which was written using wording that the Scottish Government supplied, promised children and their families that their answers would not be shared outwith their local authority. It is now clear that that data not only has been passed to the Scottish Government but has been shared with third-party researchers. Will the cabinet secretary confirm who gave the directive to pass the information to third-party researchers? Will she meet me and my constituent who was on BBC Scotland last night, who has campaigned on the issue, so that the matter can be further investigated?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise Mr Balfour's interest in the topic, and I know that he has engaged with the Government on it historically. I am more than happy to meet him and his constituent—I heard the report on "Reporting Scotland" last night.

Mr Balfour raises an issue in relation to data collection and instruction. I raised the issue with officials, and my understanding is that an instruction did not come from ministers. That is

part of the way in which data is shared across the Scottish Government, and I give the assurance that it is not unique to this data set.

I am more than happy to engage with Mr Balfour on the issues that he has raised.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This is an important matter. It is important that we get our data protection procedures right, so I am pleased to hear that the cabinet secretary is taking the issue seriously. However, I hope that what has happened does not prevent us from doing future work, because we need to understand what young people think and how they live their lives. The Parliament can be detached at the best of times and, unless we do such work, we will be even more remote. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that future surveys are done correctly but that they are carried out, so that we understand what young people are thinking?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie makes a really salient point. Gathering such data is important for all the reasons that I alluded to in my response to Mr Whitfield, but it is important that we get it right. As the cabinet secretary, I must reflect on the fact that, for whatever reason, 16 local authorities across the country decided not to engage in the survey. We need to work with local authorities to re-establish a more effective way of supporting them in that regard.

Gathering such data is not new; it has been undertaken by Governments for many years. The health behaviour in school-aged children survey has run since the 1990s, with the latest round of it having taken place between January and March 2022. There is also the long-standing Scottish schools adolescent lifestyle and substance use survey, which has been undertaken since 1982—before I was born. Such issues are routinely included in pupil surveys in other countries across Europe, including England and Wales. There are a variety of ways in which Governments across the world gather data on those types of issues.

I need to reflect, because we need to do better in the future in relation to how such data is gathered. I hope that members understand, from my responses today, that that is the approach that I will take.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): We need to go back to the basics. The health and wellbeing census was organised and promoted to councils by the Scottish Government, although half of councils said that they would not participate in it. The results of the survey were given to the Government, which has collated the data. What questions has the cabinet secretary asked about why that data has been offered to researchers? What breaches of confidence in relation to freedom of information have there been? A

number of members have asked about that, but they have not had a clear answer. Although she has said that she has now suspended that data collection and is investigating the matter, what independent investigation of the whole process will take place?

Jenny Gilruth: I might have said this in a previous answer, but it is worth repeating. I have asked the chief statistician to write to Research Data Scotland so that it removes the health and wellbeing census from the data catalogue on its website. The sharing of that information is the salient issue that has been raised today. Data access requests by researchers in relation to the health and wellbeing census will be paused while we undertake our considerations. It is important that I have an opportunity to engage with the chief statistician on that data set.

On Mr Briggs's other question, it is my understanding that no direction was given to share the data. The data was shared as a matter of course, as many data sets across the Government are.

Business Motions

17:09

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16340, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 18 February 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Community Wealth Building Progress and Future Ambition

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Employer National Insurance Contributions

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 19 February 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Protecting the Powers of the Scottish Parliament

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Renters' Rights Bill - UK Legislation

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 20 February 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2025-26

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Independent Review of Sentencing and
Penal Policy

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 25 February 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland)
(No. 4) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 26 February 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Constitution, External Affairs and
Culture, and Parliamentary Business;
Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Green Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 27 February 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 17 February 2025, 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.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-

16341, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 1 timetable.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 23 May 2025.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-16342, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-16330.4, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on addressing child poverty through education, 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 digital voting.

17:11

Meeting suspended.

17:13

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-16330.4, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 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)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 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]
 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)
 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)
 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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16330.4, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 29, Against 88, Abstentions 4.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16330.3, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on addressing child poverty through education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Adamson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Unfortunately, I could not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

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)
 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)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [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)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16330.3, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, is: For 19, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on addressing child poverty through education, 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)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 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)
 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

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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-16330, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on addressing child poverty through education, is: For 73, Against 48, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the critical contribution made by education in eradicating child poverty, which is a national mission and the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government; notes recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which highlights that Scotland will see a reduction in child poverty levels in the years ahead due to Scotland-specific policies, such as the Scottish Child Payment; further notes that the Scottish Government has committed to making further progress, and agrees that there is a collective responsibility for every local authority, and educational organisation and body in Scotland, to work

together with the Scottish Government to address child poverty; commends Scotland's teachers and schools for their work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, and recognises that progress has been made, and that this programme will require more funding certainty over the longer term; welcomes the further investment in tackling child poverty through education in the draft Scottish Budget for 2025-26, including within schools through the expansion of free school meals, the uprating of the school clothing grant, continued funding for the Scottish Attainment Challenge and investment in Bright Start Breakfasts, as well as the around £1 billion investment in funded early learning and childcare and the £3.5 million investment in new skills pathways for colleges, and agrees that all MSPs across the Parliament have a responsibility to promote the interests of children and young people and to work together to share ideas and innovation to address child poverty through education.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-16342, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Local Libraries

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16155, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on save local libraries.

The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes what it sees as the vital role that local libraries play in their communities, acting as central hubs for borrowing, learning, community engagement and sourcing advice and support; believes that the closure of libraries leaves communities without these vital services, and that this is particularly damaging for rural areas where libraries can be heavily relied on; considers that library closures have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, including children, older residents and people with limited access to digital resources; notes the reported concerns raised by communities around the proposed closure of libraries across Scotland, including the threatened closure of those in the Perth and Kinross Council area; understands that local authorities have a legal obligation to provide public library services; believes that mobile libraries are often not suitable alternatives; considers that library services require adequate public funding to remain viable and have a critical role to play in achieving the Scottish Government's priorities, including eradicating child poverty; believes that a closed library is unlikely to reopen, permanently limiting opportunities for the communities they once served, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to help protect the future of Scotland's libraries.

17:22

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank those members who signed my motion to bring the debate to the chamber. I am sure that members will wish to thank the communities that have fought so hard to save our libraries, and to thank librarians for their tireless work.

I was delighted to host library campaigners from across Scotland, and from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals Scotland, in Parliament today, and we had an insightful discussion with members at lunch time. I welcome those who have joined us in the public gallery, and many more who are watching online.

In recent months, we have seen an outpouring of love for our libraries, which shows how critical they are to the health of our communities, especially in this post-Covid age, when there are real dangers of social isolation and misinformation at large. Seven libraries across Perthshire have been threatened with closure, from Alyth to Auchterarder and Birnam to Comrie, and Scone, and libraries that will remain open are likely to

have their hours cut from April this year. Most of those are rural libraries, and once they are gone, they will be gone forever.

Throughout the winter, I have been to some big demonstrations in Perthshire and attended online meetings, at which people have told warm-hearted stories of how important libraries are to them. It is clear that libraries are about so much more than just book borrowing. In Scone, I learned about how vital the library is for older people, enabling them to come together and share memories, especially those who are suffering with dementia. Those reminiscence groups are one of the few places where sufferers can escape the fog of dementia and feel truly heard.

One constituent pointed out that because the local primary school does not have its own dedicated library, the services at Scone library have helped to fill that gap. In Birnam, a father told us how his family have borrowed “hundreds” of books, while a mother told us how visiting the library is a highlight of her daughter’s week and is encouraging a real love of reading in her and all her friends.

Across Scotland, libraries host workshops and activities that benefit the community. There are knitting and toddler groups, and every library in Scotland offers free or low-cost activities such as bookbug, which is designed to support early-years development. Those activities are vital for communities, helping to connect the local community and build support networks for people at all stages of life. Libraries are often the last free, warm facilities that are available in many rural communities. They are genuinely a lifeline.

It is ironic that closures are being proposed to make savings for Perth and Kinross Council when that is clearly a false economy. Perth and Kinross Council spends less than any other council on its library services, despite having the second-highest level of library usage in Scotland. Removing warm, free spaces that combat social isolation will have a negative cost to the council and to health services in the long run. It is no wonder, therefore, that Perthshire’s communities have mobilised against closures, organising petitions and working together. They have a positive vision that is about thriving libraries, not just fighting closures.

Communities have been meeting with Culture Perth and Kinross, which is the arm’s-length company that was set up by the council to run the libraries. CPK is, admittedly, in a difficult position, as years of underfunding from the council have meant that it is now at the point at which it has to either shut services or pass them over to community-led management. However, rural communities in Perthshire are already being asked to take over other services from which the council

has retreated, and volunteers can only do so much to backfill cuts.

Community-led management might be an option for some libraries, but negotiation cannot take place under the threat of immediate closures. Negotiation has to be respectful, and the cuts must be taken off the table first. The council is also exploring options such as click-and-collect style services and more mobile libraries, but those should be additional services, not a replacement. Once again, I stress that libraries are not just about borrowing books—they are about so much more than that. Closing local services will also force people to travel further. Should Birnam library close, for example, residents will either need to travel for half an hour to Perth or negotiate a dangerous junction on the A9 to head north to Pitlochry. Both options are costly in time and in money.

The council has options. This year’s budget settlement provides the flexibility to stop the cuts this year. In fact, the council’s finance and resources committee was meeting this afternoon to scrutinise the administration’s draft budget, ahead of a final decision later this month. It looks like communities are finally being heard on the issue, and there is at least a stay of execution that can be agreed. I think that it is fair to say, however, that Perth and Kinross Council has overstretched its resources on projects such as Perth Museum, without fully considering the impact on core library services. While Edinburgh has introduced a tourism levy in order to invest millions in its cultural offering, thousands of overnight stays across Perthshire currently bring in no levy income at all. That needs to change.

Many campaigners across Scotland feel like they are on a treadmill, with proposals to cut libraries being brought back year after year. A total of 53 libraries have closed across Scotland since 2014, and many more are now slated for closure, so it is a critical time right now. The Perth and Kinross Council area is not alone. In my region, library closure proposals in Stirling are back again for consultation, while Clackmannanshire Council is proposing to cut every single library except one.

The Scottish Government’s public library improvement fund is a welcome source of project funding, but it does not stop the systemic reduction in core funding that we are now witnessing. A redefinition of what constitutes statutory library provision, especially in rural areas, is desperately needed, and I would welcome a commitment from the Scottish Government tonight to explore that. What constitutes the “adequate provision” set out in legislation is currently a very low bar, as is the requirement around consultation.

As we look to the next libraries strategy in 2026, now is the time for Government to connect with

grass-roots communities and library professionals, hear their voices and act to protect the future.

Libraries must remain the beating heart of our communities, and I look forward to hearing the reflections of other members and the Minister for Public Finance in the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It will surprise nobody, I am sure, to hear that the debate is heavily oversubscribed. We will need to extend it, but even so, I am conscious that, with a delayed decision time and a number of events in Parliament this evening, I will have to ask members to stick to their time, if not less. I will be cutting them off if they do not.

With that, we move to the open debate. I call Christine Grahame—you have up to four minutes, Ms Grahame.

17:30

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Warning duly noted, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I congratulate the member on securing the debate. This is not the first time that I have leapt to the defence of our public libraries, and I welcome those in the public gallery and beyond who are listening.

Before I go on to speak about the libraries in my constituency, I note that one of the reasons that I am the beneficiary of two degrees can be attributed to my then local library at Blackhall, in Edinburgh.

Stuck for somewhere to study at home—we were five children, stretching from ages one to 16; the 16-year-old was me—in a cramped council house, I sought sanctuary in that library and stumbled across critiques of Shakespeare plays that I had been studying for my highers. I never knew that such books had been written and I could not put them down. That A pass in higher English passported me to university. That in itself led to my career as a secondary teacher, and then as a solicitor and a politician—thanks all to Blackhall library, although I do not know if the library will thank me for being a politician.

Indeed, as a novice teacher, my own education improved in leaps and bounds thanks to the wonderful, eccentric Dorothy Devlin, who was then the librarian at Woodmill high school in Dunfermline, which was my very first posting. I think that, as a team, we made English as a subject worthwhile, and even fun. She also stood her ground against an attempt to censor her stock of books. There was something wild and radical about her, so even though she had a bun, and spectacles on the end of her nose, she put paid to the assumption that librarians are boring—they are

radical. Today, there is the internet, which is useful, of course, but it cannot replace the feel and look of a book, which has no annoying pop-ups.

To fast-forward decades, as an MSP, I hold two of my surgeries in local libraries at Newtongrange and Gorebridge; indeed, my next surgery is due this Friday. Like many libraries, they go beyond books—there are CDs and newspapers, and the library provides not only a spot for a politician, but internet access and training. There are reading groups for under-fives, bookbug sessions and mums-and-toddlers sessions. Indeed, I frequently encounter a crawling toddler as I listen to a constituent's concerns. I am also well acquainted with "The Wheels on the Bus" and other ditties.

There are folk for whom the library is a destination where they can pick up a book or two and have a wee chat with the librarian, and keep warm now that their winter fuel payment, at least for this year, is gone—that is politics. I do even better—I am provided with a cup of coffee and, depending on the duty librarian, even a biscuit or two, so I am right in there in the thick of it with what libraries are all about.

I end on this quote from Laura Ward, an American singer:

"Libraries always remind me that there are good things in this world."

Let us keep our libraries, with all the diverse opportunities and spaces that they provide, right at the heart of their communities—and if they try to close one in my constituency, I will be right there, barricading the doors.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was exemplary time keeping, Ms Grahame.

17:33

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Christine Grahame—that was a lovely speech. I also thank Mark Ruskell for bringing the debate to the chamber, as it is very important. I apologise for not making it to the lunch-time event today—unfortunately, I had another meeting on, but it would be fantastic to have met the many campaigners that I am sure were there.

I desperately wanted to speak about this issue, in part because of my position as an ex-councillor, which I will come to in a minute, but also because I want to talk, as Christine Grahame has just done, about the many things that highlight the value of libraries to our communities. We use libraries at different stages of life. As a young child, I went to a library with my mother and enjoyed reading the books there. As a student, I went there to learn and find books on what my school teacher was telling me about. At university, I used the library a lot. When I had children myself, we would go to

the library not just weekly, but several times a week, and sit on the floor and read the very many books—more than I could ever provide at home for my young children.

I have, therefore, never enjoyed hearing people talk about the amount of people who go into a library or reduce it to simple numbers, because that is not what a library is about. Some weeks, a library might get more visitors, and other weeks it will get less, but we all use libraries at different stages of life, and to me, that is the value of libraries. I also associate myself with the remarks about librarians, who do fantastic work. Their work is now about more than just books—they point people to housing and to computers. They are amazing, and I have never walked into Buckie library in my community and not received a warm, smiling welcome, so I think that they do an absolutely brilliant job.

However, the other reason that I wanted to speak today concerns the pressures that I faced in 2017, and which many councillors face now. When I walked into Moray Council in 2017, I was absolutely eager. I had been a community councillor and was heavily involved in my church and in many aspects of the community, and all that I wanted to do was serve the people of Buckie.

The first week that we were there, the chief executive took us all, as new councillors, to one side and we had presentation after presentation that told me that I had no money; that I had to cut budgets; that there was nothing that I could do; and that it was all in front-line services. I have never felt so distraught in my life. To be honest, I felt so pressured that week, even more so than when I came to Parliament for the first time last February. It felt awful, but that is the pressure that our councils are under.

I have yet to meet a councillor—please tell me if there are some—who wants to shut a local library. Such councillors do not exist—nobody wants to do that, but we are forced to do it because of budget pressures, and it is essential to get that point across. We want our councillors to keep these libraries open, but I call on the Scottish National Party Government to think seriously about why we are even talking about the issue in the chamber.

It is not just me who is saying that—it is the Accounts Commission, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Fraser of Allander Institute and Audit Scotland. All those independent organisations are telling us that council funding has been cut, but it is not just that—

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I would like Tim Eagle to square that with the £1 billion in tax cuts that his party would

implement, and the further pressure that that would put on local government budgets.

Tim Eagle: I was just about to be nice, because I was going to say that it is also about the other pressures on councils. We have faced abnormal pressures in adult health and social care, to say the least.

The budget conversation that we are having is about growth. The Conservative party is a low-tax, small-state party—that is what the Conservatives stand for, and it is perfectly reasonable, in this day and age, to have that viewpoint. We believe that we can take Scotland forward in a low-tax economy—in fact, our businesses might agree with that.

That is the point. If the Scottish Government is not going to give more money directly to councils, but if it does want to save libraries—it will be interesting to hear what the minister says in summing up—it will be crucial that he puts a further pot in place to protect our local libraries.

17:37

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Mark Ruskell for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I join other members in welcoming campaigners who have joined us in the public gallery. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet the campaigners at lunch time today, due to a prior commitment in Fife, but I recognise the work that those who are involved in the campaigns have been doing and continue to do, and I acknowledge the correspondence that I have received from concerned constituents.

Last year, the Scottish Book Trust published “The value and impact of Scotland’s libraries” report. A quote from that report is highlighted in one of the briefings that we have received for the debate, and I would like to share it. The report states:

“Nowhere else in modern life, whether urban or rural, is there a public space where anyone can enter and remain without the expectation of payment or labour. Nowhere else is there a public space where people can access information, combat digital poverty, learn new skills, socialise with others, express themselves creatively and seek to self-improve, entirely for free. These institutions are vital for every person in Scotland, and they are endangered.”

For our children, libraries are gateways to literacy and learning. I know how important Kelty library was for me, and I remember the excitement of graduating to an adult library card at 14—I even remember the book that I took out. Libraries provide access to a diverse range of books, fostering a love of reading through various challenges and encouraging the exploration of new genres. Programmes such as bookbug not only introduce young minds to the joy of stories

but offer new parents a platform to connect and build social bonds and support maternal mental health.

For adults, libraries offer quiet spaces that are conducive to work and study, helping to reduce household expenses by providing a warm and free workspace. They can serve as hubs for skills development, digital access and community engagement. As others have recognised, for older people, libraries are vital in helping to combat social isolation. They offer opportunities to engage in lifelong learning, participate in community events and access resources that might otherwise be out of reach.

The proposed closure of a number of libraries in Perth and Kinross, most of which serve rural communities, has prompted many constituents, who are concerned about the plans, to contact me. Libraries such as Alyth, Scone, Birnam and Comrie are key parts of those communities, and people are worried that they will be lost. I have corresponded with Perth and Kinross Council and with Culture Perth and Kinross about the plans, and they have made it clear to me that the decisions have been driven by financial considerations—that point was repeated in a reply that I received from them today.

I have asked the Scottish Government to consider what action it could take to prevent closures from being required. I have also asked Perth and Kinross Council whether it could look again at its funding decisions following budget announcements. In particular, I urge the council to reconsider its plans for the North Inch in Perth, given its importance as a school library. I hope that that will be taken into account in forthcoming budget considerations.

Of course, libraries have running costs, and the financial pressures on our local authorities mean that they need to look at where savings can be made. Campaigners are keen to explore different funding sources. They also know that, if a library closes, it is unlikely to reopen, which is why they are calling for time to develop sustainable solutions that acknowledge and leverage the pivotal role that libraries play in our communities. For example, consideration could be given to targeted funding that could support libraries as part of our educational and social infrastructure. Some are also exploring management models and considering whether direct council control would be more efficient.

All members will agree that libraries are invaluable resources, as well as part of our communities. I hope that a solution can be found that means that they can continue to be so.

17:40

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I add my thanks to Mark Ruskell for securing this extremely important debate.

Like Mr Ruskell and several other members in the chamber, I attended the recent rally in Perth city centre. My inbox has been full of emails from constituents expressing, in vivid terms, how upset they are about potential library closures. That is why I raised the issue at First Minister's question time on 12 December. I was grateful that John Swinney recognised the role of libraries, but I hope that the Scottish Government recognises just how strongly local people feel about the issue.

My constituents, many of whom are in the public gallery, are facing local library closures in Comrie, Auchterarder, Alyth, Scone and Birnam. All have made the point that, in a budget year that could see quite substantial council tax rises, they want their services to reflect those payments. If we are asking constituents to pay more, they do not want to have fewer services. That is a valid point that many of them have made.

The demonstration in Perth had somewhere between 200 and 250 attendees. That is credit to the campaigners in the Save Our Rural Libraries group, who have done such an excellent job in raising the profile of the issue and garnering the widespread support of MSPs and local councillors. It was obvious to all who were in the crowd that day that—to come back to Christine Grahame's point—the love of libraries transcends generations. Both young and older people who were there spoke, and many others who had been doing their shopping in the city centre joined in as the demonstration was taking place.

That diversity has been reflected in the correspondence that members have received from people who—rightly, in my opinion—have been venting their frustration. Part of that frustration came about because they felt that there had not been a proper consultation process. By some accounts, some fairly frequent library users had been unaware of that so-called consultation process, which was deeply regrettable.

Earlier in the debate, we heard why library facilities are so important to our local communities. There is substantial evidence that they generate meaningful economic, educational and social value. They are critical to tackling inequalities by providing wide-ranging learning resources to people who could otherwise not afford them.

However, we all know that libraries go far beyond just simple access to books and intellectual stimulation; they are social hubs and are important for local networking. That is even more the case in rural areas and, as Mark Ruskell rightly said, it has been so true following the Covid

pandemic. We all owe a debt of gratitude for the facilities that libraries provide to our campaigners.

I am happy to support the motion in the name of Mark Ruskell.

17:43

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Mark Ruskell for putting this motion down before the Parliament.

In September last year, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture how the Government planned to support the retention of Scotland's public libraries. With an air of casual indifference, he told the Parliament that, on top of the general revenue funding to local authorities, the Scottish Government provided £665,000 a year to the Scottish Library and Information Council. But, for more than a decade, funding to Scotland's local councils has been disproportionately cut by this Government, so the pressure on municipal libraries is becoming unbearable. He must have known that a payment that is static in cash terms is a cut in funding, year on year, in real terms.

In fact, since this Government came to power, spending on our public libraries is down, book stocks are down, library staff numbers are down, librarian numbers are down, opening hours are down and over 120 public libraries have closed for good.

Libraries matter. They are a vital part of our children's education. They combat digital exclusion and social isolation. They are anchor institutions that can help to stimulate the urban regeneration of our towns and city centres. They represent a world beyond the market—a safe, equal, democratic, free space, run not for profit but for enlightenment.

In an increasingly digital society, libraries are not needed less; they are needed even more. In an age of deliberate online disinformation, fuelled by right-wing politicians and media, they provide an antidote: curated sources, the provenance of which can be trusted.

Literacy does not just enhance people as units of economic production; it enriches them as human beings. Literacy is an end in itself. The pleasure of reading broadens horizons, so it is my belief that public lending and reference libraries represent one of the most enduring and successful forms of state cultural provision over the past century and a half. It is no accident that 100 years ago—20 years before the creation of the national health service—Nye Bevan chaired the library committee of the Tredegar Workmen's Institute. In the face of the depression of the 1920s and

1930s, it did not close branches down; it opened new branches up.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I admire Richard Leonard's praise for Nye Bevan and other socialists. However, would he recognise the role that capitalist entrepreneurs and philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie played in providing libraries that were free for working people?

Richard Leonard: Well, I have a certain view about Andrew Carnegie and the part that he played in a steel dispute in America in the 19th century—but that is perhaps for another day.

Let me return to the municipal road to socialism. Libraries were a burning flame of knowledge. They symbolised that change was possible. They came to represent an understanding that progress is not simply measured by material conditions alone and that you can rise with your class, not out of your class. It is an idea that is in danger of being extinguished.

Finally, I was struck, when I visited Falkirk central library on Monday, that libraries in this century are about not just books but the spoken word, free computer access, bus passes, local history, football memories, Lego sessions, the lending out of jigsaw puzzles, free home library services for people who have difficulty getting out and about, a musical instrument library and a bookbug session, all in the one library—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Richard Leonard: Let me finish with the words of the author Philip Pullman—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Richard Leonard: He said:

"I love the public library service for what it did for me as a child, and as a student, and as an adult. I love it because its presence in a town or a city reminds us that there are things above profit, things that profit knows nothing about, things that have the power to baffle the greedy ghost of market fundamentalism."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Leonard. Even with the intervention, that would not have come in at four minutes.

17:49

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate Mark Ruskell on securing the debate—it is extremely important, and I am delighted to speak in it, as it allows me to put on record my profound gratitude to the campaigners who are fighting against library closures by Aberdeenshire Council and Moray Council. I have had the pleasure of working with them, and I know that one of them, Kate Johnstone, is in the gallery

this evening. She has been a real force in the fight to save Cullen library, and she knows and understands how important libraries are.

There is an apt quote by Professor R David Lankes:

“Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities.”

It is with and for those communities that I speak today. They understand, as I do, that libraries are vital hubs that provide far more than books. Their closures are not just a loss of service but a blow to the very heart of our communities.

The closure of libraries in Scotland, particularly in rural areas such as Aberdeenshire and Moray, is a direct result of short-sighted, cost-cutting councils and it disregards the essential role that libraries play in supporting children, older residents and those who lack digital access.

I do not doubt that councils are struggling financially. We know that times are really tough. However, what does Tim Eagle think that 14 years of Tory austerity have done to our public services? To Richard Leonard, whose party is upholding that and adding more pressure with the national insurance tax on jobs, I say that Labour is constantly blaming the Scottish Government for those things, but the Scottish National Party Government is trying to resolve the issue. Local councillors set the priorities and make the decisions—they have the power.

The libraries that are earmarked for closure in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast—Cullen, Macduff, Rosehearty and Cairnbulg, and more—are not just buildings but thriving community centres. SNP council groups in those councils have offered budgets that do not include the cuts to library services.

I was privileged to meet save Cullen library campaigners and to host a public meeting to support them. I must point out that all the members of the public who attended that meeting were women, highlighting equality issues, which I will come on to later in my speech.

I have also visited Macduff library, where I met a campaigner, and I saw at first hand the lifeline that those spaces provide. In a cost of living crisis, libraries offer free internet and help residents to navigate services. They also provide them with warm spaces and social interaction. I saw the children’s corner with sensory play and vital health signposting. Those services are indispensable to rural communities as costs soar.

Closures will hit those who can least afford them, and children will lose reading clubs and after-school activities. Older residents, many of whom already face digital exclusion, will be cut off from resources and community connections.

The Scottish Government has a steadfast commitment to culture and communities. Despite Westminster austerity, it has delivered a record £34 million to boost the culture budget this year as part of a £100 million pledge by 2028-29. Local authorities will receive an extra £5 billion, and an extra £144 million was announced just yesterday to cover United Kingdom Government-imposed national insurance costs that threaten public services.

Ultimately, this is an equalities issue. Under the Equality Act 2010, the public sector equality duty compels local authorities to consider how their decisions impact people with protected characteristics such as disability, age and gender. Many of those people are library users who will be impacted negatively by closures. Councils must take that responsibility seriously. Any failure to do so not only risks harming the most vulnerable, but opens up the potential for legal challenges. Ignoring equality is unjust, but it is also unlawful. Stand up for your communities, and please save our libraries.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The last couple of speeches have come in over the time limit. If that continues, those who speak later in the debate will not get the full allocation. I call Paul Sweeney, who has up to four minutes, to be followed by Maggie Chapman.

17:53

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Mr Ruskell, the member for Mid Scotland and Fife, on securing the debate on an issue that affects all our communities. After all, libraries are so much more than places that people just go to borrow a book, although that is an important core service. They are central to building communities and inspiring generations.

In the history of the public library system in Scotland, its immense expansion in the late 19th century was truly a remarkable social achievement. In 1885, only 5 per cent of Scots had access to a public library. That grew to almost universal provision by 1920. In the wake of the Education Act 1872, expanding primary education from five to 13 years drove demand for public libraries across Scotland. We saw that reflected in the growth of municipal socialism in cities such as Glasgow, with the private bill of 1898 to establish the city’s first public library system.

Perhaps it was, in a way, the first public-private partnership, because there were significant acts of philanthropy around that time as well. We heard earlier about the Dunfermline-born steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who, despite his chequered history in regards to workers’ rights, approved funding for 2,509 libraries across Britain

and the United States in the early 20th century. To quote him:

“A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people—it’s a never-failing spring in the desert.”

In 1901, Mr Carnegie wrote to Glasgow’s lord provost Samuel Chisholm, describing how he and his family had sailed from the Clyde bound for New York a half-century before and that he wished to donate money so that Glasgow could build new free libraries for Glaswegians. In that letter, he said:

“Glasgow has done so much in municipal affairs to educate other cities and to help herself ... that it is a privilege to help her.”

Although his sizeable donation of £100,000 set in motion Glasgow’s public library system, which saw the creation of 15 public libraries across the city, it was still a requirement for the corporation of the city to finance the operation of those libraries and, indeed, to fill them with books; there was a co-dependency there.

The libraries were also built with great municipal ambition in mind. Inverness architect James Rhind was successful in winning the competition to design seven of them; to this day, those libraries are magnificent exemplars of Edwardian baroque architecture. I am sure that the minister is familiar with the Dennistoun library, which was one of Rhind’s great achievements.

As I said, Carnegie said:

“a library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people.”

We should be in agreement with him on that, at least, even if we do not necessarily agree with his model of capitalism.

Of course, the public library system in Glasgow culminated in the creation of what is probably the most famous library in Scotland: the Mitchell library, which, surmounted by its magnificent bronze dome and the figure of Minerva, the Roman god of wisdom above it, dominates the M8 that runs through the city. That figure is still the symbol of what the public library system in Scotland means today; it is about imparting wisdom to the people of this country.

Even as we hold vast amounts of information in the palms of our hands today, with smartphones and internet connection, our public libraries remain an essential public service that provide free access to technology, education and social connection. That is particularly true in an intergenerational sense, given that older people in particular can be socially and digitally excluded. We know from Age Scotland and others how important the provision of libraries is in that regard.

As we have heard about this evening, we also need to recognise the threat that libraries across Scotland face. Numerous libraries in Glasgow, including Maryhill, Whiteinch and the Couper institute, have faced closures as recently as 2021. Securing their future has been an on-going campaign.

I encourage the minister to consider how we can apply to public service modernisation a bit of entrepreneurialism in the spirit of our Victorian forebears, so that we can renew the public library system, secure the legacy of those great Victorian buildings, and use them for a new social purpose.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious of the number of speakers who still want to speak in the debate, so I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Mark Ruskell to move the motion without notice.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Mark Ruskell]

Motion agreed to.

17:58

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank my friend Mark Ruskell for securing this important debate, and I thank the groups and organisations who have sent us informative briefings. Most of all, however, I thank my constituents who have been in touch to share their experiences and insights, because this debate is about human stories: it is about how we live in community and how we share our lives in neighbourhoods.

That is fundamental for us as Greens, because libraries are sites of radical redistribution, experiments in shared sustainability, and models of resistance against capitalist appropriation and waste. Libraries are where community happens, where creativity flourishes, and where literature, art and philosophy resist the oppression of the right’s culture wars. Every day in our libraries, quiet revolutions happen—revolutions that will not be homogenised.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that they are under attack, but it is utterly unacceptable. I stand with all those, especially those across the north-east, who are fighting to reverse closures and resist those that are threatened—those acts of societal and cultural vandalism.

In Aberdeen, some of the most deprived communities are still bleeding from the loss of six local libraries two years ago. In Dundee, proposals are live for three to be merged into a hub—again, affecting those least privileged, with the fewest

alternatives. Seven are threatened in Moray, and an incredible 13 in rural Aberdeenshire.

There are common features to all of those attacks. The first is a failure of transparency. My constituents do not know what is being considered until it is too late, future plans are being hidden and legal advice is kept secret.

The second is a failure of consultation—of genuine participation. People are making their views known, clearly and eloquently, but decision makers do not listen. It is not really consultation when people are simply told what is going to happen, or when it takes place only after closures have already happened.

The third feature is a failure of evidence-based decision making. Cases for closures are unclear at best, with paltry savings or inflated running costs identified, and sometimes no explanation is given at all. Libraries that are selected for closure are often both the most efficient in terms of the cost per hour that they are open, and the best used, with rising numbers of local people active in them, especially since Covid.

Most devastating of all is the complete failure to understand what libraries are, how they work, and why they are essential. The law's vague promise of adequate provision is, ironically, inadequate. Even if we forget everything else that libraries do, and just talk about books, we can see how crucial that work is. In our child poverty crisis, parents and carers need that physical space where children can encounter and explore books, and where they can touch and play with them, hear and read them, and take them home. Click and collect and doorstep delivery cannot do that. Books are not DIY widgets or pints of milk; reading is not a transaction but an adventure, and we do not know where we are going until we get there.

What is true for children is true for adults, too, especially those who are alone or who are isolated, excluded or marginalised. We are in LGBT history month and in race equality week, which this year has the theme of every action counts. In libraries, every action really does count.

Library staff do fantastic work in curating collections around the themes that people really need. They give practical information, which is sometimes lifesaving, but they tell a true story, too. They say, "You are not alone, you are accepted and cherished and you are part of a community, here and beyond".

When we lose our libraries, we lose paths that we might have trodden, adventures that we might have taken and hope that we might have shared. My constituents stand for that hope—they stand in resistance, and I stand with them.

18:02

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, thank Mark Ruskell for securing the debate, and I echo his thanks to librarians and volunteers.

Libraries deliver a range of benefits that make them key to Scottish Government priorities such as improving literacy, closing the attainment gap, tackling social isolation and closing the digital divide. The health and wellbeing offer from libraries alone is estimated to bring a cost saving to the national health service in Scotland of £3.2 million a year.

With sustained investment, libraries have the potential to deliver transformational outcomes for the people of Scotland. I do not think that anyone here would dispute those assertions—in fact, I think that we all agree on that. However, we are faced with a situation in which local authorities such as Perth and Kinross Council have been forced to pursue a path to close some rural libraries. I have been a councillor, so I understand the budgetary pressures that councils face with every budget cycle, but it does not have to be that way.

For the rest of my contribution, I will focus on one rural library in particular, because I took the time to visit Auchterarder library to see for myself how much of an impact the closure would have. For members who do not know, Auchterarder library is the epitome of a rural library. It is small and well stocked, and it provides the community with books, puzzles, toilet facilities, free wi-fi, free access to digital newspapers and e-books, printing services and seating. It holds events, book clubs and bookbug children's reading groups, and people can even bring their dog. I think that we can agree that it is an excellent service.

On top of that, the library is 200m down the lane from the back of the primary school. The primary school is on the campus with the community school of Auchterarder, so it would be easily accessible for homework clubs and after-school support. That suggestion has been put to Perth and Kinross Council, but keeping the library open and providing an after-school solution for working parents seems a stretch too far.

At that visit, I had to queue to speak to the receptionist. There was a group sitting in the back area, which is often used for story time. I was stopped on a couple of occasions by people who were in the library and wanted to highlight how important it is to the local area and to raise their concerns with me. A gentleman was set up to work using the wi-fi. I was delighted to meet, by chance, one of the diligent campaigners, Shirley Williams, who has worked to present Perth and Kinross Council with a petition with more than

7,000 names, which calls for the cut to be stopped.

That inspiring group has highlighted that, in their opinion, the consultation process employed by Culture Perth and Kinross has been flawed and rushed. By the council's own admission, the opening of Perth museum has been given priority, so everything is now being done at speed. That is particularly concerning to me, and I urge Culture Perth and Kinross to ensure that the consultation process has been handled properly.

The irony is not lost on me that the excellent Perth museum will host the final letter by Mary, Queen of Scots, which was written just a few hours prior to her death, to celebrate the centenary of the National Library of Scotland by the same Culture Perth and Kinross that is looking to close its rural libraries.

For me, the most important point is that the closure of rural libraries discriminates against children who live in rural areas, which goes against the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UNCRC states that every child has equal rights, including to information and culture. The library is the only publicly funded culture outlet in Auchterarder. If that is taken away, the local children of that ever-growing town will be at a disadvantage, and that cannot be allowed to happen.

18:06

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank Mark Ruskell for securing the debate, and I thank the campaigners and professionals whom I had the privilege to meet this afternoon, whose passion for our public libraries across Scotland was evident.

I could more than fill four minutes with my personal love of libraries, their atmosphere, the smell of them and the quiet sounds. I could list my favourite ones—the Mitchell library in Glasgow, the Shaw library at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the British Library by King's Cross—but none of those comes close to Lochee library in Dundee, where I hold my surgeries and where my mother took my infant children for their Thursday morning reading group. The library was built among the mills where my family worked when they arrived from Ireland. For many people in Lochee, it served as a literal and metaphorical escape from those mills.

The fact that many of Dundee's public libraries have survived is due partly to their being protected by the listed status of their buildings. That leads to the very difficult situation in which many of the libraries that are most at threat in Dundee are in the post-war housing schemes that line the city's

periphery, because they do not have listed status. Removing the library function from the listed buildings would leave them as burdens on the council, rather than assets. Many of the communities affected have been engaged in a long-term fight to hold on to their libraries. As colleagues have pointed out, there are real equality issues, given the pattern of poverty in my home city.

That brings me to Douglas community centre and library, in the east of the city, which is currently under threat. Proposals to close that facility have been put in front of the council in the current budget round. The local management group raised a petition, which attracted 794 signatures. This weekend, following a door-to-door campaign, the number of signatures collected passed 1,000. I congratulate all the campaigners who are fighting to protect that facility.

The community libraries in question are to be replaced by a library space in a new community campus miles away from Douglas. A council officer described her experience of seeing the plans for that library space; she told me that she wept when she saw them. The existing libraries are to be replaced by—literally—three shelves of books, not just for the children of the school but for the community at large.

As colleagues said at lunch time, that gives rise to a question about the concept of adequacy that sits within the legislation. Nobody thinks that what is proposed is an adequate replacement. The council is playing the game and the legislation in order to cut libraries and remove them from people. I support all the comments that members have made about the social purpose of our library system, what it can do for people and how important it is as a place of refuge, friendship, learning and advice. The libraries in my city are part of that, and we must protect them.

18:09

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Mark Ruskell on securing the debate. He and I spoke a few weeks ago at the rally to which he and Liz Smith referred, when more than 300 people stood in sub-zero temperatures in the centre of Perth in support of libraries. I pay tribute to the many campaigners there, and to others from other parts of Scotland, who have come to the cause to fight for their local libraries.

Like Liz Smith, I have received a huge volume of correspondence from constituents. In fact, I cannot think of an issue over the past few weeks that has generated more correspondence than that of library closures in Perth and Kinross. I pay tribute to the save Alyth library and save Birnam

library campaigns for their helpful briefing for the debate.

We have heard a lot in the debate about the value of libraries. I will not repeat everything that we have heard, because I agree with pretty much everything that has been said. Libraries are not just sources of learning but important community assets—community spaces that host a variety of events. Let us not forget that, at a time when older people in particular are suffering from isolation, loneliness and increasing fuel costs, libraries are warm spaces where they and people who otherwise might be trapped at home alone can gather, meet and have human company. That should not be underestimated.

What is this all about? I must disagree gently with Karen Adam, because I do not think that the matter is down to the choices of individual local councils. In my area, the SNP run Perth and Kinross Council; in her area, Aberdeenshire Council has a Conservative administration. Tim Eagle, drawing on his experience as a local councillor in Moray, made the fair point that no councillor anywhere in Scotland wants to close a library. The fundamental issue comes back to the budget settlement that is given to local councils by the Scottish Government.

I will not rehearse all the arguments that I made yesterday in the budget debate, but we are in a situation in which, despite the Westminster block grant being at a record level, councils across Scotland are having to make very difficult decisions about cutting services such as local libraries and, at the same time, talking about unprecedented increases in council tax—10 per cent or more in different parts of Scotland. Clearly, something is not right, and I am afraid that it comes back to the door of the SNP Government.

I will respond to Mr McKee's intervention on Tim Eagle about money. I read today that the cost of the new Barlinnie prison in Glasgow has now gone up to £1 billion—a tenfold increase on the original estimate. If the Scottish Government perhaps looked a little more carefully at where it is spending its money, we would find a little extra money for local councils to support their libraries.

I do not think that Perth and Kinross Council can hide behind a group such as Culture Perth and Kinross, which is an arm's-length external organisation that is wholly funded by that council. Councillors must take responsibility and ensure that there is adequate funding to support libraries. I hope that the SNP-led administration on Perth and Kinross Council will listen to the campaigners and take the right decisions to ensure that funding is provided.

Fundamentally, the issue comes back to the door of the Scottish Government. It has to step up

and ensure that councils have the support so that we do not lose those vital local resources, which we all agree must remain.

18:13

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I thank Mark Ruskell for securing this members' business debate on the important issue of public libraries. There have been some very interesting contributions and personal reflections on the use that members have made, and continue to make, of libraries across the country.

My colleague Angus Robertson, who is the culture cabinet secretary, and I are avid supporters of our public libraries and commend the tireless work of our librarians across the country in keeping those services thriving. The Scottish Government as a whole deeply values our public libraries and firmly believes that everyone should have access to those services. Libraries provide a wide array of essential services and consistently demonstrate their crucial role in our communities, thanks to the dedication and passion of all those who work in the library sector. We are truly grateful for their efforts in helping public libraries evolve and maintaining those vital services.

That commitment was showcased in the tremendous response from libraries during the pandemic, when they were among the only cultural venues open in Scottish communities, offering lifeline services. We are pleased to see in communities across Scotland such passion for and dedication to for our library services, and we understand how valuable the opportunities that are provided via libraries are for people from all walks of life and of all ages.

Libraries offer a free and inclusive space for people. They provide a wide range of benefits, offering essential access to learning materials and resources that might otherwise be out of reach. They are key to providing access to information technology, bridging the digital divide, closing the attainment gap, enhancing educational outcomes, supporting children and young people in early years, engaging our older citizens, and empowering our communities. They play a fundamental role in building strong, resilient communities and allowing people to come together to learn, connect, engage and create. I would also note that, like Christine Grahame, I will be holding my constituency surgery in a library—Riddrie library—this Friday.

According to 2023 Scottish household survey data, libraries, including mobile and online libraries, were the most frequently visited cultural events or places across the country, with 16 per cent of adults visiting a library at least once a

week, and more than a third visiting at least once a month.

As members will know, library policy is devolved to our local authorities, which have a statutory duty to ensure adequate provision of library services to their residents. In response to Mark Ruskell, I make a commitment that the Government will engage with our local network on the definition of “adequate provision”.

Michael Marra: In Dundee, various library facilities are being closed, with three shelves of books proposed as a replacement. Does the minister agree that that is not in any way an “adequate” replacement for those facilities, in terms of the legislative framework that he pointed to?

Ivan McKee: I am not familiar with the specifics of the library situation in Dundee that Michael Marra has talked about, but on the surface of it, it sounds as if that is pushing the definition rather far. I am sure that my colleague Angus Robertson, who leads for the Government on this matter, will be happy to pick up that specific point with the member.

Mark Ruskell: Will the minister give way?

Ivan McKee: I am a bit concerned about time.

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

Mark Ruskell: I welcome the minister’s answer to my question, which I will now follow up with another question. When will the Government review the “adequate provision” definition?

Ivan McKee: As I have said, I am speaking for Angus Robertson this evening, and I am sure that he will be happy to engage with Mark Ruskell on the specifics of that. The Government is happy to take forward an engagement process on the definition.

On the issue of funding, which has occupied much of the debate this evening, the Scottish Government has provided block grant funding of more than £14 billion to local authorities this financial year—that is, 2024-25—which is a real-terms increase of 2.5 per cent. Assuming that our budget passes later this month, authorities will, in financial year 2025-26, receive record funding of £15 billion, a further real-terms increase of 4.7 per cent.

I should say that, when members talk about being in favour of a small state, they should recognise that libraries are very much part of the state and that those are the kinds of services that come under threat when they argue for that kind of economic and social policy. Local authorities are independent corporate bodies with their own powers and responsibilities; when it comes to

meeting their statutory obligations, it is, of course, up to each local authority how it manages its decision-making process. and it is for locally elected representatives to make local decisions on how best to deliver services to their communities. We urge local authorities to consider any decision on public libraries extremely carefully, and we encourage our colleagues at local level to work in partnership with communities to explore ways of delivering those services, based on local needs.

For our part, we will continue to work with local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve. I have listened with interest to some of the imaginative suggestions from Paul Sweeney and others, and I am sure that my colleague Angus Robertson will be interested in taking them up.

Christine Grahame: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: I am very short of time now, but I will if it is a very quick one.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief.

Christine Grahame: I meant to pop this in earlier, but I think that the minister will probably want to take this opportunity to compliment the mobile libraries across Scotland, which go to even remoter parts of my constituency and the Highlands and Islands.

Ivan McKee: Indeed I will.

As has been mentioned, the Scottish Government supports our libraries through our funding to the Scottish Library and Information Council, which provides leadership and advice to Scottish ministers, local authorities and the wider library sector. We support the council with annual funding of £665,000, including £450,000 for the public library improvement fund. That is on top of the Scottish Government’s general revenue funding to local authorities. In 2024-25, 13 individual projects across the country were awarded PLIF funding. A further £270,000 has been allocated to SLIC in the 2025-26 budget, subject to its passing later this month, to allow it to expand its important work.

I should add that our culture strategy for Scotland, and its action plan, set out actions that are designed to meet the needs of communities, and cultural outcomes from libraries at a local level are at the forefront of that.

I again thank Mark Ruskell for lodging the motion and allowing us to have this debate, and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to respond on the vital role of our public libraries and to advocate for their unique place at the centre of our communities. It is of critical importance that local authorities think carefully about the future of

those services. Finally, I am proud that the Scottish Government continues to invest in and support our public libraries to provide a service fit for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I also thank colleagues for their co-operation in allowing us to get in so many speakers in the time available.

Meeting closed at 18:21.

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Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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