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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 26 April 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is writer and broadcaster Billy Kay.

Billy Kay (Writer and Broadcaster): Thank ye, Presidin Officer, fur giein me the honour o addressin oor national Pairlament.

Ah wull stert wi a kenspeckle quote fae Hugh MacDiarmid, yin o the skeeliest makars in Scots leeterature's thoosan year history:

"To be yersel's—and to mak' that worth bein'.
Nae harder job to mortals has been gi'en."

It is mibbe even hauder fur MSPs, fur ye cannae jist be yersel fur yersels, but fur aw the sels, aw the sowels, aw the brither an sister Scots fae Maidenkirk tae Johnny Groats and ayont, that ye represent, amang whilk there is ower 1.5 million Scots speikers.

Noo is the day and noo is the oor tae rax oot and bring their words, scrievit on the waws outside the Pairlament, intae the hert o this chaumer. They are wirds perfit fur debate sic as "speir"—inquire; "threap"—assert; "jalouse"—suspect; and "tak tent or it's tint"—take care or it is lost. Or, gin ye dinnae want tae be douce, ye can hae "a flytin", fur it is a leid hoatchin wi gleg insults—"glaikit", "gawkit", "gowk".

In daein sae, ye wull raise the international profile o this airt wi words fae fremmit leids that touch us at hame. Fae the French "se fâcher", we hae "dinnae fash yersel". Fae Dutch, "hunkers"; fae Scandinavian, "lugs"; and fae Latin, "dispone".

Ye wull be howkin as weel fae a gowden seam in yer ain pairties' histories. MacDiarmid wis a foondin faither o the National Party o Scotland. Fellae makar Cunningham Graham and his freen Keir Hardie were foondin faithers o the Labour Party. The chiel wha first defined oor democratic intellect wis the Conservative Walter Elliot. The Liberal Gladstone wis originally Gled Stane—"gled" bein Scots fur the bird o prey, the kite. And the Greens are thirled tae oor ayebydand land whaur Scots wirds sic as "smirr", "caller", "haar" or "gloaming" seem tae arise oot the yird itsel and haud oor herts.

But, mair important than thon, ye wull gie a signal tae the weans in the schuil that the culture o their hame is valued by fowk electit by their mithers an faithers. Bairns like the quaet wee lass in primary 2 in Fawkirk wha ran an lowped intae her teacher's arms, lauchin and greetin wi joy, whan she furst heard her mither tongue in cless, or the sweirt learners in Dundee, dour teenage boays wha gaed tae the tap o the cless fur the very furst time whan the langage they yaised ilka day cam intae the schuil in buiks that they then devoored, and they nivver luikit back. Scottish weans transformed learnin a Scottish leid.

A nation whaur naebodie is excludit and awbodie kens that they belang. Shairly, dear memmers o the Scottish Pairlament, thon is weel worth bein yersel fur.

Topical Question Time

14:04

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is topical question time. There is a lot of interest this afternoon. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would welcome succinct questions and answers to match.

Ferguson Marine Ferry Contract (Documentation)

1. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the potential impact on Scottish Government standard due diligence of reports of lost documentation related to the Ferguson Marine ferry contract. (S6T-00664)

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): We have been absolutely transparent about the decision-making process and the information that informed the decisions. There is a clear audit trail of key decisions and the basis on which they were taken. In relation to the documents mentioned in the Audit Scotland report, a thorough search has been conducted and no ministerial response to the submission of 8 October 2015 has been located. As is outlined in the report, we have committed to a formal review following the completion of the vessels project.

Daniel Johnson: I do not know quite how to respond to that answer. On Thursday, the Auditor General for Scotland expressed frustration at the lack of records of ministerial decisions regarding the waiving of refund guarantees that would normally be expected in a contract such as that for the ferries. Written authority for ministers should be required for that, but Audit Scotland could obtain no record of it.

The Auditor General describes that as frustrating. He is being charitable. It is at best negligent and incompetent; at worst, it could be unlawful, breaching the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000 and/or the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. Will the minister commission an investigation into the matter to establish the facts and, critically, whether the law has been broken?

Ivan McKee: The Scottish Government and Transport Scotland, along with Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Ferguson Marine Port Glasgow, have co-operated fully with Audit Scotland and the former Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's inquiry. That included the provision of documentation, the provision of a detailed written statement, interviews with key

personnel and attendance at RECC by officials and Scottish ministers. As I said, we have also committed to undertake a review on completion of the two vessels.

Daniel Johnson: The problem is that, for transparency, the documents need to be there, and they are not. The law requires it.

Sadly, it is an isolated incident neither in the sorry saga of the two ferries nor in other Scottish Government interventions. It follows a pattern of opaque decision making and roughshod process that can be seen elsewhere, such as the environmental indemnities for Liberty Steel that were found to have breached state aid laws. There is also the Lochaber smelter, where hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money was put at risk through secret guarantees. That decision emerged only after a two-year battle between journalists and the Scottish Government over freedom of information requests on which the Scottish Government knew its decisions would be overturned on appeal. The ferries were launched in time for the Scottish National Party's conference—fake windows and all—before they were ready and to a timetable that cost taxpayers more.

The pattern is of due process that is deficient, lacking transparency and distorted to suit political ends rather than the public interest. We could call it many things—negligent, incompetent or deficient—but, when the decisions have all been wilful and deliberate, the word that I would use is “corrupt”. It is perhaps not corruption for individual gain, but it is corruption of the process for party-political gains that are contrary to the public interest. If that is not the word that the minister would use, what word would he use?

Ivan McKee: As I indicated, a thorough search for the documents was undertaken and no ministerial response to the submission was located. As I also indicated, and as is outlined in the Audit Scotland report, we have committed to a formal review following the completion of the vessels project.

It is important to recognise—which Daniel Johnson and other members fail to do—that, seven years after those events, Ferguson's is still employing hundreds of people, contributing to the local economy and keeping—[*Interruption.*] I know that some members do not think that Scotland's industrial base is important, but perhaps they should be quiet for a minute and listen to this answer, because it is important to the people of Scotland and the people of Inverclyde that the yard still employs hundreds of people and keeps commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde alive. The same is true in Lochaber, where the site that was referred to is employing an increasing number of

people and is successfully delivering products into the Scottish market and further afield.

What is important is that we support Scottish industry. The Government makes no apology for being committed to doing that, ensuring that we develop and ensuring that hundreds of people are still employed in those highly skilled, highly paid jobs, which would not be the case if the Labour Party or the Conservatives had been making decisions on the future of Scottish industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementary questions. I hope that the questions and answers will be listened to respectfully.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Judging by some of Daniel Johnson's comments, he would probably rather not have the yard there, not have the jobs and not secure the yard's future. There was a thorough parliamentary inquiry in the previous parliamentary session and there has now been scrutiny by Audit Scotland, both of which have generated significant reports and recommendations. Will the minister set out what the Scottish Government did to contribute to and co-operate with both those inquiries, including the provision of relevant information?

Ivan McKee: Stuart McMillan makes his points well. As I said, the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, CMAL and Ferguson Marine Port Glasgow all co-operated fully with Audit Scotland and with the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's inquiry, which included the provision of documentation and of a detailed written statement, as well as interviews with key personnel and attendance at REC Committee meetings by officials and ministers. As I also said, we have committed to undertake a review on completion of the two vessels.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): When will that be?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden, if you have a question to ask, press your request-to-speak button and I might call you.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): This is institutional corruption on a grand scale. Ivan McKee is showing breathtaking arrogance if he thinks that there has been any transparency in the matter. This is the SNP's secret Scotland at its worst.

I will quote another law. The Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 requires the Scottish Government to have a records management plan and to

"identify ... the individual who is responsible for management of" a department's

"public records".

In this case, who was that person? I want the name. Why did they not ensure that a record was kept of the decision-making process?

Ivan McKee: As I said, we have been transparent, published the documents that are available, complied with the inquiries that have taken place and committed to undertake a review on completion of the vessels, as the Audit Scotland report outlined. We are being transparent and open, and we are producing the documents that are available and ensuring that they are in the public domain. We have complied with the inquiries that have taken place and we have committed to undertaking a review on completion of the two vessels.

I go back to a point that I made earlier. At the core of this is the Scottish Government's absolute commitment to supporting Scottish industry and jobs and continuing to do so, whereas the Opposition parties are clearly not concerned at all about the people who work on such sites or about supporting their employment.

Graham Simpson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. What is the point of members coming to the chamber and asking straight questions when the minister completely ignores the questions and answers something else?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that Mr Simpson will know by this stage that that is not a point of order. The content of ministerial responses is not the Presiding Officer's responsibility.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): We can all agree that transparency and accountability are key in government but, to be frank, I do not think that the Scottish Government needs lessons in that from any Opposition members. We should not lose sight of why the Government stepped in to save Scotland's last remaining commercial shipyard and of the importance of the work that the shipyard is undertaking. Will the minister provide an update on progress?

Ivan McKee: The yard today announced the completion of a major milestone in the build of one of the dual-fuel ferries. In a major engineering operation, hull 802 was fitted with its large bow unit, which, at 100 tonnes, is the largest single unit to be added to the ferry's steel hull. The final units will be lifted into place this week, completing the main hull and steelwork and making way for the installation of the ferry's aluminium superstructure, which involves all the units that sit above the main deck. Good progress is being made in progressing the construction of the ferries.

Since the Government nationalised Ferguson's, the yard has delivered three smaller vessels. By

nationalising the shipyard, we have kept it open, kept people in work and rescued more than 300 jobs. Since October 2021, Ferguson Marine has consistently employed more than 350 staff. It has had 42 apprentices working and learning there, and a further 15 will be taken on this summer.

The yard has been in a period of turnaround since 2019, and the past two years have been challenging—the pandemic has exacerbated that. However, it is clear that progress is being made. Three smaller vessels have been delivered and a new chief executive officer has been appointed, who is already making a difference and implementing a transformation plan. The incomes of hundreds of people and families have been maintained, including those of lots of independent small businesses that are contractors. Two new ferries for the islands are being built, and a milestone in their construction was reached today. It is no wonder that the Opposition never wants to talk about or welcome the Government's industrial strategy and how we are protecting jobs and industry across Scotland.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is clear that there have been multiple failings relating to the contract and that islanders—particularly islanders on Arran this week—are paying the price. Does the minister not accept that any review cannot be delayed and that there must be a full investigation, conducted independently of ministers?

Ivan McKee: We are making significant progress on delivery of the vessels, which is what matters to people on the islands. CalMac Ferries is engaging on a daily basis with the community on Arran and elsewhere. The Minister for Transport has joined the calls to ensure that all possible actions are being taken regarding ferry provision.

As I have said regarding what was outlined in the Audit Scotland report, the Government has committed to a formal review, following completion of the vessel project. That is a commitment that we are sticking to.

Douglas Lumsden: If the Government is so keen on promoting transparency, will it agree to lift the gagging orders that are in place at Ferguson Marine?

Ivan McKee: As I have made clear, the Scottish Government, Ferguson Marine, Transport Scotland and CMAL all co-operated fully with Audit Scotland and the REC Committee's inquiry.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): That is not what he asked about.

Ivan McKee: They have all co-operated fully with those inquiries—that is the fact of the

matter—and we have committed to undertake a full review on completion of the two vessels.

Solicitors (Domestic Abuse Cases)

2. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the potential impact—[*Interruption.*] Pardon me: I am reading out Daniel Johnson's question. It was very well asked, although it is worth asking again, given that we did not get an answer the first time. However, I will now ask question 2.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported planned boycott of solicitors taking on summary cases brought under section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, from 3 May 2022. (S6T-00659)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You just about recovered there, Mr Greene.

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): Section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which criminalises coercive and controlling behaviour, has been in operation for more than three years. Last year, section 1 cases accounted for around 5 per cent of all domestic abuse cases. To avoid intimidation and further traumatisation of victims, Parliament explicitly barred accused persons in those cases from representing themselves.

Legal aid funding is available for section 1 cases, as it is for other criminal cases. If a case is particularly time consuming, solicitors can apply to have additional costs met, rather than the fixed fee, through the exceptional case arrangements.

Contrary to claims that legal aid funding overall has not increased in the past 20 years, the Scottish Government has increased legal aid funding by more than 13 per cent over the past three years. In addition, a further substantial offer was made, worth 7.5 per cent for criminal legal aid and 5 per cent for civil legal aid, but it was rejected by the profession last week. An offer of mediation has been made and remains on the table.

Although we consider the legal profession's demand for a 50 per cent increase to all fees to be unaffordable, we remain committed to engaging with the legal profession to seek a reasonable and affordable resolution to the matter.

Jamie Greene: Just to remind everyone watching, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 was the Parliament's flagship law designed to tackle the horrors of domestic abuse in Scotland. Nearly 1,600 charges were reported under section 1 of the act last year alone.

Those who are accused under section 1 cannot represent themselves in court. Therefore, if they cannot afford a solicitor themselves, the trial will inevitably be postponed, more people will be held

on remand for longer—an issue that the Government says it wants to tackle—and more victims of abuse will simply wait longer for justice. That is the reality of the situation.

Given all that, can the minister tell us how many trials she thinks will now be postponed or delayed as a result of the action by solicitors? Given that the Scottish courts were short-changed by £12 million in this year's budget, does she now regret that decision?

Ash Regan: I have already said to the member that cases under section 1 of the 2018 act concern 5 per cent of all domestic abuse cases. As he has outlined, domestic abuse cases are obviously a priority area for the Government. We fully understand the impact that long waits can have on victims.

Prior to and throughout the Covid pandemic, priority has been given to progressing cases that involve domestic abuse. We invested £50 million last year, and a further £53 million this year, to help to tackle the unavoidable backlogs in the justice system and to provide enhanced support for victims. The latest figures from the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service confirm that both solemn and summary sheriff courts are progressing cases above pre-Covid volumes.

We will continue to support the process of justice Covid recovery. The member is right to say that this is serious disruptive action, so we are considering as an absolute priority ways in which we can work with willing partners to address any shortfall in the availability of solicitors.

Jamie Greene: There are avoidable and unavoidable delays and court backlogs. This one is entirely avoidable. It is serious stuff—solicitors do not boycott cases just for the fun of it. They tell us the reality of what is happening in our legal profession: there are barely any criminal lawyers in Scotland who are under 30 years of age—everybody knows that; there has been a 25 per cent reduction in the number of solicitors who work on legal aid cases; and 40 firms have quit the scheme altogether in the past few years alone.

The Scottish Solicitors Bar Association says that the Government has consistently ignored the profession when it told the Government that it was in crisis. The Law Society of Scotland went even further—it said that the current

“crisis in legal aid ... threatens the very core of justice” and risks “irreparable damage.”

Legal aid is in its worst position since devolution—everyone except the minister will admit that. Her party has been in government for 15 years now. Why is legal aid in such a mess, and what is the Government going to do to fix it?

Ash Regan: I believe that I had an exchange on this matter just last week. I remind the member that, in Scotland, we have maintained the eligibility for and the scope of legal aid, which is not the case elsewhere in the United Kingdom where the Conservatives are in charge. We recognise the importance of legal aid providers, and we are committed to continuing to listen to them and to invest in them. Therefore, it is simply not possible to say that the Government has not been listening and responding.

Over the past two years, we have listened and responded. I will take the member through a few of the actions that the Government has taken in direct response to issues that have been raised with us by the profession. When the Covid pandemic first arose, there was obviously going to be a vast impact on businesses of all kinds, including legal aid businesses. Straight away, we changed the law to bring in an interim payment to help the cash flow of those businesses, because we recognised that that was an immediate concern.

We went on to put in place £9 million of grant funding for Covid resilience for firms whose businesses had been affected by the pandemic. In response to capacity issues that the profession raised with us, we put in place a £1 million traineeship fund, which supports trainees, 75 per cent of whom are women.

Over the past few years, we have put in place permanent, across-the-board fee rises—3 per cent in 2019, 5 per cent in 2021 and 5 per cent in April, which came on stream at the beginning of this month. That is £10 million over the past year in permanent, across-the-board rises.

We also put forward a detailed package of criminal case fee reforms, which the profession had highlighted to us as being of significant concern to it. That package was worth around £3.8 million. If we add all that together, along with the 5 per cent rise that we offered to the profession last week, I do not think that it is possible to say that the Government is not listening or responding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As with the previous question, there is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions. In order to get them all in, we will need brief questions and briefer responses.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): What level of engagement has the Scottish Government had with the profession over the past three years?

Ash Regan: I have regular routine meetings with the Law Society of Scotland. During the early stages of Covid lockdown, additional meetings were held, and we moved to having very regular meetings with officials and ministers to discuss the

impact of Covid on solicitors. There was close working with officials on mitigating that impact, including in relation to the grant funding that I mentioned previously. The former cabinet secretary and I met representatives leading up to the £20 million package of funding. That close working has continued, with the most recent meeting with the Law Society being last Thursday.

At official and ministerial level, there have been frequent discussions as part of structured, timetabled meetings, often on a weekly basis. We also established an engagement group, so that officials and representatives from the profession could discuss all the issues that are connected to legal aid. The group met on five occasions over a six-month period last year.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Almost half a billion pounds was cut from the legal aid budgets between 2007 and 2019, so any increases since 2019 do not compensate for that scale of cuts.

As the minister knows, the dispute relates to domestic abuse cases. Does she agree that such cases can be complex and time consuming, that solicitors are raising legitimate concerns, and that the dispute undermines the Government's strategy on violence against women and girls?

Ash Regan: I completely agree with the member that such cases are, to use her words, "complex and time consuming". If solicitors feel that the fixed fee does not reflect the time that they spend on DASA cases, they can apply to have the fixed fee disallowed and to have a time-and-line fee applied through exceptional case status arrangements.

I would say to the member that, prior to this action, we were not aware of solicitors raising with us specific issues about DASA cases. Had they done so, I would have certainly looked at that. That offer is still on the table: if solicitors working in that area feel that fees for such cases are not sufficient, I am more than happy to discuss that with them.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): In response to the Bellamy independent review of criminal legal aid, UK Government proposals include increasing legal aid rates by 15 per cent, as recommended by the report. How does that compare with the Scottish Government's offer to the legal profession?

Ash Regan: As we have discussed already, other parts of the UK are facing similar challenges. The Bellamy review, which concluded recently, recommended a 15 per cent increase in fees on the basis of a comprehensive study that took place with the co-operation of the Law Society down south. We asked the Law Society of Scotland to co-operate with us on a similar analysis, so that we could take a similar evidence-based approach

to fees in Scotland, but it did not believe that that process would be of material benefit.

Taking account of the previous two 5 per cent increases, and the further 7.5 per cent offer that we made recently, which has not yet been accepted, the Scottish Government's offer to the legal profession already exceeds the amount that was recommended by the Bellamy review.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In answer to Jamie Greene, the minister gave some percentage rises to suggest that all is well. What are the actual percentages once inflation is accounted for?

Ash Regan: I cannot remember exactly—5 per cent of domestic abuse cases. If the member is referring to the 3 per cent rise in 2019, the 5 per cent in 2021 or the 5 per cent in April this year, that amounts to £10 million of investment in the past year alone. The Government is listening to what the profession is saying. I am listening to what the profession is saying. My door is open to discuss with the profession fee rises, whether across the board or in response to specific sets of fees.

The profession's request for a 50 per cent fee rise across the board would amount to about £60 million a year. In the light of public sector funding pressures, that is not affordable. However, we are committed to working and engaging with the profession to seek a resolution on the matter.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Solicitors Bar Association says that the minister has ignored its views on complex and lengthy cases, on access to justice and on the number of people who are no longer doing legal aid work. Is the minister in the same meetings as the association, or is she in a parallel reality?

Ash Regan: The only person in this chamber who is in a parallel reality at the moment is the member. He was not listening to my extensive answers detailing the very regular consultation that the Government has with representatives of the legal profession. Instead of repeating my earlier answer, I will add detail to what I think may be the last question on the issue.

Of course I accept that there is an issue. I am not at any point saying that I think that everything is okay, and I totally understand that some practitioners would like to have higher fees. Obviously, the way to take things forward is to negotiate in order to try to resolve the issue. That is what the Government is committed to doing and I have restated that position today.

It may be of interest to the member to hear that we are undertaking wider work on the legal aid system and we will bring forward a bill on legal aid in this session of Parliament. That presents an

opportunity to reimagine legal aid and perhaps to put it on a more sustainable footing financially, to improve the experience for users and practitioners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes that topical question time. There will be a brief pause to allow people on the front benches to change seats before the next item of business.

Low-income Families (Access to School Education)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-04138, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families. I invite members wishing to take part in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function as soon as possible.

14:31

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased to open this debate on the important issue of the reduction of the cost of the school day. Child poverty is an issue that we would all wish to see eradicated and the debate provides an opportunity to consider the actions that we can take through schools to reduce the cost of the school day and provide further support to families who are experiencing low income.

Those actions do not stand alone, but are one strand of our work to tackle child poverty and support families. I will use this opportunity to set out our approach and highlight the range of actions that we are taking on this important issue.

The Government wants the best start and a bright future for all children and young people in Scotland. We want to make this country the best place for them to grow up—a place where they can thrive and prosper as they realise their potential. However, all too often, that potential is hampered by the blight of poverty and inequality, which is why our national mission to tackle child poverty is so vital.

Our second tackling child poverty delivery plan, published only last month, sets out how we will drive forward our national mission, recognising the contributions that all parts of society must make for all of Scotland. It sets a critical path towards meeting the ambitious statutory targets to significantly reduce child poverty by 2030, as laid out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which was passed unanimously by Parliament.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary recognise that three out of four of the child poverty targets will be missed next year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important to recognise, as we did last month, the important work that has been done by this Parliament. However, as we also set out, we will continue to have difficulties in tackling child poverty—indeed, all poverty and inequality in Scotland—as we face the welfare cuts from Westminster; the £20 cut in

universal credit is but one example. That makes it exceptionally difficult for us to meet our targets, but we are determined to do so, as the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government laid out when she launched the plan last month.

The new plan is backed by up to £113 million of additional investment in 2022-23, including funding to mitigate the benefit cap, further increase the game-changing Scottish child payment to £25 a week and deliver a new employability offer for parents. The actions that we have set out are putting money in the pockets of families now—helping them to tackle the cost of living crisis—and setting a course for sustainable reductions in child poverty by 2030.

High-quality early learning and childcare can make a huge difference to children's lives, particularly when they are growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. Evidence shows that accessible and high-quality ELC helps to provide children with skills and confidence to carry into school education and is a cornerstone in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Since August 2021, all councils have offered 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare to eligible children, making high-quality ELC available to families and saving parents up to £4,900 a year for each eligible child. In the face of the pandemic, achieving the levels of provision and uptake that we now see has been a significant achievement by local government and our local delivery partners in the private, third and voluntary sectors. I pay credit to the work that they are doing on that issue.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary accept that the funding formula that is currently used by our councils is unfair for the private, voluntary and independent sector? Does she agree that something must be done to sort that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are investing heavily right across ELC provision. We are looking carefully at what is happening with private providers, which is why the Government has already undertaken work on, for example, the financial health check and why we continue to work with local authorities and private providers to ensure that we not only understand what is happening in the system but act on it. The minister is in close contact with private providers to talk through the issues, which she has done regularly.

This year, we will begin engagement with families to set out our ambition for providing early learning and childcare for all one and two-year-olds. That will start in the course of this parliamentary session with children from low-income households. Our vision is to develop an

offer that will contribute to supporting the wellbeing of the whole family. It is important that we engage directly with families, the early learning sector and academic experts to design how the new offer can best support children and families. We will be guided by what the evidence tells us about what is best for children and families, depending on the age and stage of the child. As set out in "Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026", we will conduct an eligibility review in order to ensure a coherent and joined-up system for families, aligning with plans for the expansion of school-age childcare.

We are contributing to further reducing costs for families by committing to transformational reform as we design a new system of wraparound school-age childcare, which will offer care before and after school and during the holidays. It will be free to low-income families, helping to support parents and carers to have secure and stable employment if they wish to do so.

Our new system will help to reduce inequalities in access to a range of activities around the school day for children from low-income households. Children will have access to a range of activities, offering them life-enhancing experiences, including positive learning and developmental opportunities.

Building a new system for school-age childcare that is accessible, affordable and flexible will play a pivotal role in our mission to tackle child poverty, especially for families on lower incomes. That will have positive outcomes for parents, too, leading to sustainable employment and increased earnings, which will enable families to lift themselves out of poverty.

This year, we are investing £10 million in a targeted summer 2022 offer for children and families in low-income households, which will provide co-ordinated access to food, childcare and activities during the holidays. The school holidays should be a time for fun, and our summer 22 offer will support young people with their wellbeing through access to a range of activities. Furthermore, we will continue to provide funding for payments, vouchers and meals during all school holidays for those eligible for free school meals on the basis of low income, as part of our phased expansion of free school meals.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): What proportion of those who are eligible for support such as free school meals or the school clothing grant are getting it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I can give you time back for all the interventions.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I presume that the member is asking how many of the families that

we think are eligible for free school meals are coming forward. I recognise that as a challenge: it is made even more difficult by the universality of free school meals from primary 1 to primary 5, which means that we then need to encourage those who could be on free school meals but are not. I do not have the exact figures to hand. I am happy to provide those to the member in writing if he does not have them already. I am aware that that is a challenge that we should look at. It is made more complicated by universality, but that is a good complication to have. I will come back to the ideas of free school meals and universality later in my speech.

We recognise the need for transformational change to provide holistic support for families. That is why, in our 2021 programme for government, we committed to investing £500 million over this parliamentary session in whole family wellbeing funding. That will enable the building of universal, holistic support services in communities across Scotland, giving families access to the help that they need, where and when they need it, for as long as they need it.

In collaboration with our partners, we are developing an ambitious programme that seeks to drive a whole-system shift from crisis intervention to early preventive support. We now have a clear, collective vision about what good family support looks like and the key features that characterise it, underpinned by the principles in the Promise. Delivering that vision will help families to thrive and stay together and will contribute to key national priorities, including delivering the Promise.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does that include looking at the challenges in sharing data between local authorities, third sector bodies, charities and central Government? The data seems to be in different silos.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Data sharing is always a challenge when we talk about any holistic approach. We must face up to those challenges and find a way through them if we are to have holistic support. I am happy to work with the member on that and on other issues connected to the whole family wellbeing fund because I believe that it could be genuinely transformational if we get it right. Data is but one of many challenges that we will face.

I am conscious of time and of the number of interventions, but I will try to get through the rest of my speech.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a bit of time in hand.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am so happy to hear that I have more time to take interventions.

As we progress through the new parliamentary session, our mission to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap is as important as ever and we are committed to strengthening the links between that and our national mission on child poverty. That is why the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge programme, which I launched at the end of March, has a new mission

"To use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty related attainment gap."

By removing barriers caused by low income, we can ensure that all children and young people have the same opportunities to succeed.

Working together with local authorities, Education Scotland and schools, and on the back of a £750 million investment in the previous parliamentary session, we are investing £1 billion over this session in the Scottish attainment challenge programme. I recently announced that pupil equity funding of more than £0.5 billion will continue to empower head teachers over the next four years, so that schools can support the children and young people who need it most.

Local authorities and schools will continue to make local decisions about how best to support children and young people impacted by poverty, with funding, for the first time, allocated to every local authority to drive forward our joint mission. That funding will support approaches in the classroom and beyond the school gates to mitigate the barriers to learning caused by poverty. That is expected to have a long-term impact on the readiness of children and young people who are impacted by poverty to enter and sustain positive destinations.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister will recognise that the poverty-related attainment gap is the widest that it has ever been, following the huge impact of the pandemic. The numbers that she quotes represent a cut when compared to last year's money. Can she justify that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have said that we invested £750 million in the previous session and are investing £1 billion in this session. Of course, in the previous financial year, we had a £20 million Covid premium that we could use. If only the UK Government had given the Scottish Government more consequentialists to deal with Covid—which is still very much with the education system—in this financial year, we could perhaps have repeated that. Unfortunately, we are instead facing a real-terms cut to overall funding for the Scottish Government.

We spoke earlier about free school meals, the importance of which is widely recognised. We have been providing free school lunches during

school term time to all children in primaries 1 to 3 since January 2015. We have committed to go even further, and universal free school lunches are now available to all children in primaries 1 to 5. We will continue with our expansion of universal provision throughout the remainder of the current session of Parliament to make free school lunches available to all children in primary and special schools. Indeed, this year's budget includes an additional £42.2 million of funding to support provision to primary 4 and 5 and special school pupils and £30 million of capital for initial investment in the infrastructure that is needed, including dining and catering facilities, ahead of the roll-out. Aligned to that, during the current session, we will work with local authorities to introduce a universal school milk scheme in primary and special schools.

I turn to the school clothing grant. Every child in Scotland should be able to attend school feeling comfortable, confident and ready to learn. I know that buying school uniforms represents one of the biggest costs associated with attending school. That is exactly why we increased the national minimum school clothing grant from its previous level of £100 per child to £120 per eligible pupil in primary schools and £150 per eligible pupil in secondary schools last year. Our partnership approach with local authorities is supported by £11.8 million of funding to provide that support to local authorities.

I appreciate that not all families are eligible to receive the school clothing grant, which is why we will also introduce statutory guidance for schools in the current session of Parliament. The guidance will seek to assist schools in reducing the cost of school uniforms for families. We will also consult on the principles of a national school uniform policy and use the findings of that consultation to inform the new national guidance. In the light of the consultation, the scope of the guidance is yet to be fully confirmed. However, it is expected that, alongside support for reducing the costs of school uniform, the guidance will address equalities issues, clothing for physical education and sport, and examples of approaches that are already in place that reduce the costs of uniforms for families.

As part of our approach to reducing barriers to participation in education, we have continued to support the removal of core curriculum costs for primary and secondary pupils. That ensures that families do not need to meet the costs of resources and materials for practical lessons. We are also supporting families with the costs of instrumental music tuition. We have already provided local authorities with funding to ensure that no parent can be charged for instrumental music tuition in the current academic year, and we are working with the Association of Directors of

Education in Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on a sustainable funding package for the future.

As part of our emergency response to the closure of school buildings at the outset of the pandemic, we provided £25 million in 2020-21 to tackle digital exclusion. That investment resulted in more than 72,000 of our most disadvantaged children and young people receiving a device to support their learning. Recognising the increasing importance of technology in education, councils across Scotland have also invested in their own device roll-out programmes. We understand that, in total, almost 280,000 devices have been or are being distributed to learners.

The pandemic has reinforced the importance of digital technology. That is why we are committed to ensuring that every schoolchild in Scotland has access to both a device and connectivity by the end of the current session of Parliament in 2026.

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I apologise to the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, as I am already well over my time. I am sure that he will make his point later for me to return to in closing.

We are working across Government and with our partners to deliver on our commitments to tackle child poverty. We recognise that our schools and services that support families have a key part to play in delivering on our commitments. We are seeking to change the experiences of those who are affected by low incomes in order to provide opportunities and experiences, including through education, that help them to reach their full potential.

I look forward to hearing the reflections of members across the chamber and their aspirations for our young people during this afternoon's debate.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the actions being taken to support children and young people in low-income families to access school education; notes that Scottish Government commitments include expansion of free school meals, provision of free school milk, removal of core curriculum charges, ensuring low-income families do not face costs for curriculum-related trips, abolition of fees for instrumental music tuition, increasing the school clothing grant, producing guidance to reduce school uniform costs, provision of a digital device and connectivity to every pupil, and services to support income maximisation, and recognises that this complements the wide range of policy initiatives set out in the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland, to maximise household resources and improve children's wellbeing and life chances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given the number of interventions, I remind members that, if they intervene and then want to speak later in the debate, they may find that they need to re-press their request-to-speak button.

14:49

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Back in 2015, Nicola Sturgeon said:

“Let me be clear—I want to be judged on this. If you are not, as First Minister, prepared to put your neck on the line on the education of our young people then what are you prepared to? It really matters.”

I agreed with that then, and I agree with it now. The problem for the Scottish National Party Government and, in turn, for Scotland’s young people, is that that rhetoric and the reality have never been further apart. With every passing day, those words become more and more hollow.

I have lost track of how many debates such as this I have sat through and participated in over the past six years. SNP minister after minister stands up and sets out all the wonderful things that they are just about to get around to doing. That is depressing, and it borders on being insulting, given that the SNP Government has had 15 years in power to get on and do things. All we hear is that it is too hard or too complicated or—best of all—that all the problems will go away if only we dish out a few laptops and promise people a bike.

The truth is that many of the problems that we are talking about have been created on the SNP’s watch. Although it might be politically convenient to scream “Tories!” every time the going gets tough, it is SNP cuts to local government budgets that have squeezed education and left our schools so short of resources that they sometimes struggle even to function. Only this past week, we heard at the Education, Children and Young People Committee that many schools are using attainment funding just to keep the show on the road.

Having been lucky enough to be educated before the SNP came to power, I know that schools used to have enough resources not to have to charge young people for the basics. That did not need to be written into guidance or law. They were able to do the right thing because they had budget flexibility. Instead, what we have today is an endless stream of policies and announcements at national level, and lots of alleged new funding. However, core school budgets are being squeezed to the point at which stationery and other basic equipment are being topped up by teachers and charitable sources.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I believe that 2021 was the sixth year in a row in which there was a real-terms increase in education gross revenue

expenditure. That does not exactly match the picture that Oliver Mundell is painting.

Oliver Mundell: I would be very surprised if the cabinet secretary is speaking to schools, pupils, parents or local authorities, who all see that resources are under more pressure than ever. I do not know how any Government could claim that education is its top priority when schools are struggling to provide the basic materials for people to participate fully in lessons.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does Oliver Mundell agree that it seems that teachers are the only profession who come to us to say that they have to contribute to what they need, day to day, to make their classrooms work? We do not hear that from surgeons or from lawyers.

Oliver Mundell: Yes—and we certainly do not hear that from politicians or Scottish Government ministers.

We must also remember that the Government was all too happy to oversee a culture of exorbitant charges for music tuition. Under its watch, that became commonplace. Now, shamefully, ministers come to the chamber and seek our thanks for intervening. However, having been a member in the previous session of Parliament and having listened many times to the Deputy First Minister, who was at that time also Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, telling us what could not be done, I find this all very depressing. Frankly, the idea that, somehow, those were local choices that councils just came up with is just not believable. The truth is that that is another symptom of the squeeze on education budgets.

Again, that routine speaks to the true motivations of the SNP. Young people suffer, but that is okay, as long as the SNP can put in its manifesto something nice, promising to solve a problem that it created on its own watch.

I will move on to free school meals and breakfasts. Given the cross-party support for that in Parliament, has anyone ever seen a Government move so slowly? Where is the urgency? We should reflect for a second on the fact that we now live in a Scotland in which charities tell us that, under the eligibility thresholds, fewer young people are entitled to free school meals than was the case 20 years ago. Something has gone badly wrong.

On reducing the cost of school uniforms, there have been lots of words, but where has been the drive to change practice? Why are so many schools still encouraging branded items?

It is not good enough to identify the problem after 15 years; the Government should have shown some willingness to do something about it.

If our education agencies were not so weak and dysfunctional, and our inspectorate more rigorous, the messages might have got out there. If essential education teams in local authorities had had capacity to do anything beyond firefighting, they might have been able to work with schools on the issues. I could go on and on—but members can see the pattern.

For this SNP Government, it is more important that things sound good in the chamber than that they are deliverable for the people who need our education system most. Yes—some things might have got better, but overall, the past 15 years has been, at best, a period of stagnation that has, ultimately, become decline.

Under the SNP Government, education has lost its sense of purpose. A toxic combination of botched attempts at radical reform and empty soundbites has taken precedence over development of a system that delivers for young people. Vague notions of wellbeing are now more important than doing well. Under curriculum for excellence, there is a methodology that serves those who would do well under any system, instead of there being a truly progressive knowledge-based mindset that is ambitious for every young person.

Education should help to break down barriers and create opportunities. It should not be about lowering expectations but, too often, that is what the SNP Government's approach looks like. That does not hurt the people who are well supported and resourced at home—they get a head start—but it impacts most those who come to school to learn. Cutting teacher numbers and limiting school resources is a deliberate choice.

Again, how any SNP minister can stand up in the chamber and claim, with a straight face, that teacher numbers are at their highest level since they started to cut them is beyond me. At least there has been some recognition and admission that cutting school staff numbers to the bone was the wrong thing to do. That was painfully exposed during the pandemic and, again, all the evidence suggests that our most vulnerable young people paid the price. Rather than using self-congratulatory rhetoric, the minister might start by apologising.

Let us take another issue—funding to support those in poverty in rural communities, such as my Dumfriesshire constituency. I could not say how many times I have raised the issue in Parliament, yet we continue to hear that the Government is always looking for better ways of doing things. The idea that there are no young people in poverty in small rural schools in this country that have received no pupil equity funding is, frankly, absurd.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): I assume that Oliver Mundell is not forgetting about many of the cruel social security cuts that have been presided over by his colleagues at Westminster, including the recent cut of £20 to universal credit, which is resulting in more parents struggling to put food on the table and feed their children.

Oliver Mundell: I am not denying that there are challenges there, but once again—

Clare Haughey: “Challenges”?

Oliver Mundell: —that is the SNP Government's typical approach of talking about anything else other than answering questions about the things for which it is responsible. [*Interruption.*] If the cabinet secretary wants to intervene and tell me whether it is acceptable that there are, in our country, young people in poverty in some schools that, under the Government's funding formula, do not receive any additional funding, I would be happy to take another intervention. Frankly, telling us time and again—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The funding package is in respect of free school meals and—which is important—we are looking at the number of children in low-income families. If Oliver Mundell does not agree with the methods of measuring poverty data, particularly in respect of the number of children in low-income families, which is specific, and the 97 per cent of schools across Scotland that get pupil equity funding, will he tell us what ratio he would like us to use for that funding?

Oliver Mundell: I go back to what the cabinet secretary said earlier in the debate to my colleague Stephen Kerr, which was that not all families take up their eligibility. That is a starting point. I do not think that that is a good problem to have and it is not a new problem.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Universality.

Oliver Mundell: The problem is not being created by universality. Many young people in rural communities have gone for years without meals that they are entitled to, so the Scottish Government should stop using that as the model for allocating funding. It is welcome that we have started to look at low-income families, but that approach does not apply to pupil equity funding. The Government could have made that change, but it decided not to do so.

All that is before we get on to the challenge of even getting to school in a rural community. Council budgets have been squeezed hard. The Government points us in the direction of local authority discretion, but what discretion does a local authority have to provide transport in a rural

area, outside the statutory mileage limits, if it has no money with which to do so?

All that speaks to a lack of priority and an unwillingness to be up-front about the scale of the challenge. It is worth noting that time was found for today's debate only in the weeks ahead of the local government elections. If the issues that I have set out today are not enough to convince members of the lack of priority that the SNP gives to education, the amount of parliamentary time that is spared to discuss the matter certainly should convince them.

The SNP Government does little more than pretend that it cares. Yes—there are lots of worthwhile initiatives, but we must remember that they amount to absolutely nothing if they are not delivered. Until ministers deliver on their promises, they should stop coming to the chamber to pat themselves on the back. They are responsible, and Scotland's young people are being failed. Behind all the bluff and bluster, what do they have to show for 15 years in power?

I move amendment S6M-04138.2, to leave out from "recognises the" to end and insert:

"notes the actions being talked about again by the Scottish Government to support children and young people in low-income families to access school education; further notes that the SNP administration has had 15 years in office to make a difference, but has failed to meaningfully improve the life chances of Scotland's young people; expresses concern at the sharp decline in Scotland's once world-leading education system and the widening of the attainment gap under this First Minister, and the significant cuts to council budgets, which have left schools short of resources, and believes that it is disappointing that Scottish ministers only make education and young people a priority at election time."

15:01

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour is absolutely committed to the removal of barriers to the full experience of education for every family in Scotland. Teachers, headteachers, churches and school communities have long recognised the barriers and have worked for many decades to help young people to access the school trips and extracurricular activities that make a huge difference to their lives. It is absolutely right that good practice be adopted nationwide. The Government has a critical and key role to play in ensuring that that is the case. We know that far too many significant barriers remain and that there is a need for poverty-sensitive policies in our schools.

The Child Poverty Action Group, which in recent years has done much work that has been key to the development of policy on the cost of the school day, said that the development of poverty-sensitive school policies and practices

"reduced cost barriers, increased participation in school and after school activities, reduced financial pressures and improved promotion and uptake of entitlements",

which is much to be celebrated. CPAG spoke to many parents, one of whom said:

"times are hard when paying for the family home, food, child care and general child costs. Parents just need to do without to ensure the kids don't."

That is a common experience across Scotland, and it is becoming ever more common as bills increase and household budgets are further squeezed. We know that the cost of living crisis is getting worse week by week and will continue to get worse in the autumn, when fuel prices are set to rise again.

Parents in Scotland are regularly going without meals to ensure that their children can keep their friendships, smile and feel like all the other kids. That that is necessary demands the kind of stopgap measures—and they are stopgap measures—that are outlined in the Government motion. It also demands that we talk about why the situation happens in the first place. Why does work not pay enough to make a decent life for a family? Why are too many people locked out of employment? Why does Scotland's economy continue to stagnate, with chronically low levels of productivity, a yawning innovation gap, low levels of research and development, a paucity of technological uptake and key skills gaps in critical industries?

A crucial part of the solution, which is set out in Labour's amendment, is truly flexible, wraparound childcare that is available and affordable. The minister had some words to say about that in her opening speech. Labour's amendment focuses not on what has happened—or not happened; I will come on to that—but on what needs to be done next.

If families continue to be locked out of the workplace because it does not make financial sense to work, given the absence or expense of childcare, we have a system that is broken and in urgent need of repair. The cabinet secretary had some warm words in her speech that I assume were a preamble to her saying that the Government is already doing everything that Labour asks for in its amendment. However, after 15 years in office, members of the Government will be hearing the representations that members on the Labour benches hear weekly from people who run nurseries and from people who would love their kids to be in nurseries and cannot take on the extra hours that would enable them to put money into their bank accounts to pay for many of the things that they want for their children.

This requires a public, published analysis of what is going on in our childcare sector. The

sector has been profoundly disrupted by the pandemic. I regularly hear from operators that are losing staff and are unable to replace them. It must be acknowledged that behaviour and working patterns have changed for a huge percentage of the population, which is threatening the business models of current service providers, as needs have shifted and changed in new ways. Labour believes that urgent assessment is required of the health of the sector. Instead of having private conversations behind closed doors, the Scottish Government should commission that work.

Let us be clear: the lack of available childcare and the Government's steadfast refusal to quantify the impact of the pandemic on the life chances of the poorest children in the country has had a significant impact on the most impoverished communities and families. The Government motion mentions various interventions but, in many cases, those are a list of words rather than real actions. Many of those initiatives have yet to be delivered. The cabinet secretary shakes her head at that. Some initiatives are years away from being delivered or may never be delivered. We know how slow the roll-out has been of digital devices. They were needed last year more than ever, but hundreds of thousands of them will not be delivered for years to come. The figure mentioned today—around 280,000—is seemingly an update, but that is approaching 30 per cent of the number that will be required. That is not good enough at the moment, when the need is greatest. I have spoken to headteachers across Scotland who have used PEF money for that purpose, to ensure that young people do not miss out and to upgrade the kinds of additional experiences that schools can offer.

The cuts to central attainment funding this year of £27 million on last year shows the real priority in the Government's spending plans. No real justification was provided by the cabinet secretary in response to my intervention earlier, because this is a question of priorities. What do we think that money should be spent on? Audit Scotland said that very limited progress has been made in closing the attainment gap, which is now at its largest level ever. Is that the point at which we cut the money and do not find the additional resource from elsewhere to allow us to accelerate? If we go back on to the same track that we were on pre-pandemic, we are bound to fail, because the resource will not be there.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The figures show that we were making progress in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap before the pandemic. I am afraid that, until now, Mr Marra's speech has been a long list of demands for Government spending. However, every single year, at budget time, his party does not deliver any budgeted costings to be able to deliver those

demands. If there is any danger of warm words and little action, it is from the Labour Party, which continues to demand that the Government does something. We are doing a lot on education, but the warm words and demands from the member are all a bit little.

Michael Marra: I am afraid to say that what the cabinet secretary says is entirely false. Labour provided costed budget proposals this year, as it did in previous years. We absolutely believe that education has to be a priority for investment in this session of Parliament. The question that the cabinet secretary should be asked is why she was singularly unsuccessful at winning any arguments around the Cabinet table to get investment in her portfolio. From early years to primary school to secondary school to the cuts to education in colleges and university—every part of her portfolio was screaming out that she cannot win the arguments that require to be won for its future.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No—the cabinet secretary had her chance.

The Child Poverty Action Group has been behind so much of the policy—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: Go on.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank the member for giving way eventually.

Investment in education, from resource and capital spend is, in 2020-23, up almost £200 million, which is an increase. If the member does not think that that is satisfactory, where does he want the spend to come from in the rest of the Scottish budget? Is it health? Is it justice? Once again, we are getting rhetoric and very little else.

Michael Marra: I think perhaps that the cabinet secretary is deaf to the many other conversations that have been going on in the chamber in recent weeks. Perhaps the money could come from the grotesque waste that the Government is responsible for on a daily basis. Last week, the Labour Party set out £3 billion that the Scottish Government has wasted in recent years. Look at the ferries scandal and the amount of money that has been poured down the drain there—

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

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

Stuart McMillan: It is on that point.

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

The Government does not have a record that allows it to talk about its prudent management of the finances of the country and its responsible expenditure of taxpayers' money. That is what we are talking about. That funding was meant to help to close the attainment gap. Some £1 billion of taxpayers' money has been spent and that gap is bigger than ever. We have to remember what the First Minister said was her personal, defining mission and the Government's top priority.

Just last week, the poorest communities experienced a cut to the attainment funding of 60 per cent. The Educational Institute of Scotland said:

"we have been absolutely appalled at the levels of funding cuts to six of the original challenge authorities. It beggars belief. We do not understand why those cuts would be made at a time when we know that poverty levels are rising, when the pandemic has absolutely bludgeoned some communities."

School Leaders Scotland said that, given that we know the number of young people who are impacted by deprivation within the nine challenge areas,

"it is surely immoral to take away that funding."

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers said:

"It is clearly not right to be making those swinging cuts ... That will certainly have a negative impact in those areas."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 20 April 2022; c 31, 34 and 32.]

The cabinet secretary knows that she has cut that money, which is for the most impoverished communities in Scotland, by 60 per cent across the board, and by 79 per cent in my home city of Dundee. A former headteacher in Dundee said that he has "no idea" how Dundee can cope with a cut of more than 100 posts in those working with the most deprived. That is the way that the funding works. It is critically important to deliver more equal education. Why will the minister not listen to those voices, because it does not seem like she is listening to ours?

I move amendment S6M-04138.1, to insert at end:

"; believes that accessible childcare is critical to poverty reduction to ensure access to education and the labour market, that this must be full wrap-around, affordable provision with qualified staff, and centred on the needs of the child; recognises that extracurricular and after-school activities are key to the mental health of young people, as well as ensuring children have a wide range of skills, but that this must be affordable and accessible to all children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds; calls for the Scottish Government to ensure the universal availability of summer clubs with activities, learning and free school meals, and further calls for the publication of up-to-date baseline data on child poverty, as well as a post-COVID-19 pandemic assessment of the health of the early years sector."

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

15:11

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): No young person should be unable to fully participate in their school life. No young person should lie awake worrying about finding money for dress-down days, book sales or bake sales. No young person should be prevented from having tuition in favourite subjects such as home economics or music due to family budget pressures. No child should miss school due to the stigma that is brought on by poverty and disadvantage. And no child should miss out on the excitement and the challenge of their school residential because the fee that is set is itself a mountain to climb.

I remember my school days clearly and, although most of those memories are fond, the time when we were experiencing deep poverty, when I was about eight, is forever etched in my soul, despite those memories being the ones that I would rather forget. I have already spoken in this place about the hunger, the food banks and the anxiety that I had surrounding food insecurity, but I also remember clearly not having so much as a quarter to buy a cake at the many fundraising bake sales. I remember scouring the Scholastic book leaflet that was popped into my schoolbag and earmarking all the books that I would choose if money was not so tight, and I watched with envy, my cheeks burning with stigma and shame, as the box of books was unpacked in the classroom, with gleeful, happy kids running up to fetch their books when the teacher shouted their name. Even at that young age, I knew the pressures that my parents were under and I had not even shown them the order form in case it made the whole situation worse. Kids in poverty make those kinds of decisions all the time to protect themselves and their carers. I can also vividly remember feeling my toes cramping at the front of my shoes as they began to pinch but not saying a word. Right now, in our country there are young people ignoring their pinched toes, crumpling up and hiding away their book order forms, feigning a sore belly on yet another non-uniform day and dreaming of a primary 7 school residential that they know they will not be able to attend.

We know that that is damaging for the wellbeing of our young folk, and we know that that adds to the poverty-related attainment gap. When a small child spends their life worrying about money and food, they will often struggle to focus on anything else, including their lessons. That is why reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families is crucial, and why recognising the on-

going work across national and local government and third sector partners in this area is key. I welcome the cabinet secretary's recommitment to delivering on her priority policies.

According to the Child Poverty Action Group, which has pioneered this work in its cost of the school day programme, removing cost barriers at school helps to build the right foundations and conditions for better participation, wellbeing and attainment. Boosting incomes through access to financial entitlements helps to support families in the here and now and contributes to the wider national mission of ending child poverty. An independent evaluation of the cost of the school day programme found that those approaches can support increased understanding of child poverty, the development of poverty-sensitive school policies and practices, reduced cost barriers, increased participation in school and after-school activities, reduced financial pressures and improved promotion and uptake of entitlements.

As a member of the party of government, I am proud that we created the Scottish child payment and glad that our budget decisions ensured that we will increase it to £25 per week per child. That money is vital to help the families that face the worst effects of the Tory cost of living crisis and have experienced the worst cut to welfare in living memory. The Opposition might say that the uplift was only ever to be temporary but, when every penny is a prisoner and that extra £20 a week meant avoiding a trip to the food bank, having it snatched away again results only in further poverty and debt. It is not like a banker's bonus and it is not a nice wee bung. It made a huge difference to families and its removal was cruel. Our welcome decision to mitigate the UK Tory benefit cap, including the hated rape clause, will mean that larger families that were plunged into absolute poverty will see a marked improvement to their finances.

My SNP-led local authority in East Ayrshire, where I am still a councillor for exactly 10 more days, is making great strides in reducing the cost of the school day in a number of ways with our poverty proofing our establishments programme, which uses innovative ideas to help families. Those include everything from using PEF funding for something like a school steamie, where the community has access to clothes-washing facilities, to free breakfast clubs and reducing hunger and food waste by packaging up surplus school food for children to help themselves to on the way out the door for home. Many schools are also holding clothing swaps because it is recognised that children not only grow over the summer but continue to grow throughout the year.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Will Elena Whitham give way?

Elena Whitham: I do not have time, sorry. I normally would.

We have ensured not only that free period products are available in multiple locations but that they can be ordered and delivered straight to the home for all via an online form.

We have also made great strides in allocating digital devices and connectivity to ensure that pupils have the tools that they need for learning. If we listened to other members, we would think that no child had received a laptop or the connectivity that they need.

Holiday times can be very hard for families. We have ensured that we have school meal provision coupled with access to free activities and outings. A simple but effective tool has been the move towards automatic awards for free school meals and clothing grants to reduce the stigma of the application process and increase uptake. Across the parties, we all recognise that increasing uptake is vital. We need to ensure that we do it, but we should remember that more than three quarters of eligible families are already in receipt of the Scottish child payment.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will Elena Whitham take an intervention?

Elena Whitham: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

The measures that are set out in the Scottish Government's motion complement the wide range of policy initiatives included in its child poverty strategy for Scotland to maximise household resources and improve children's wellbeing and life chances. I am sure that we can all agree that that has never been more important as costs soar and family budgets are squeezed like never before. All our children deserve a supportive and nurturing school environment free from money worries.

15:17

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Elena Whitham pointed out that the SNP promised every child in Scottish schools a free device and free internet connection. It is failing to deliver that.

I have always believed that education is the best tool for social empowerment. One of the country's greatest achievements is the fact that taxpayers fund education for every child who calls the country home—a privilege that many millions of children around the world do not enjoy as a right.

As previous speakers highlighted, taxpayer-funded education does not instantly create equal opportunities in our education system. As a Conservative, creating equal opportunities so that every child can succeed regardless of family

income is at the heart of my politics. However, pragmatism is also at the heart of my politics and it is correct to remind ourselves that equality of opportunity will not be created with one policy idea alone. There must be a wide range of policies, three of which I will address briefly in my speech.

First, we must raise the standard of education across our schools. We do not create equality of opportunity by lowering standards in Scottish education. Professor Lindsay Paterson has said that available data

"shows that low-status students do as well in England as in Scotland, while high-status students do better in England."

He goes on to say:

"It would thus be highly disingenuous to say only that inequality in Scotland is falling and is less than in England. Inequality also fell in England, mainly by raising the low-status students while also raising high-status students. Scotland raised low-status students by less and depressed high-status students. It would not be reasonable to describe this as better progress towards equality of outcome in Scotland than in England."

I know that the SNP loves to make that comparison all the time.

The SNP has run out of ideas to improve education standards. While it offers slogans and expensive promises, international league tables and the increasing attainment gap show the continuous decline of Scottish education on the SNP's watch. Rather than believe that more bureaucracy is the answer to our problems, the Scottish Conservatives want to restore the values that made Scottish education the envy of the world. We want to empower teachers in the classroom and allow them to decide what approach is best for pupils in their school.

We must make support available to the poorest families and ensure that it reaches them. Just yesterday, when I met teachers from schools in the west partnership area, I was forcefully reminded that such support is not getting to the families who most need it. Those who most need the help are often those who are not accessing it.

Clare Haughey: I hear what Stephen Kerr says about targeting money to low-income families, but does he recognise that many of the Scottish Government's actions to support low-income families, such as increasing the Scottish child payment, are undermined by his colleagues at Westminster when they raise benefits by 3 per cent and cut universal credit?

Stephen Kerr: The minister might not like it, but we are here today to examine the Scottish Government's record. I know that SNP members all love to talk about the Tory Government at Westminster, but we are here to hold the Scottish Government to account.

Not only is there a problem with accessing support, but there is an issue even with eligibility, as my colleague Oliver Mundell mentioned. According to the Aberlour Child Care Trust, fewer children in Scotland are eligible for free school meals today than was the case 20 years ago. In 2002, children from low-income working families with an income of just over £13,000 were eligible for free school meals; today, that income threshold is a little more than £16,000 but, when the income threshold from two decades ago is adjusted for inflation, it is the equivalent of about £22,000 in 2021.

To ensure that the families who need support get it, the Scottish Conservatives are committed to introducing free school breakfasts and lunches for all primary school children. The Government would have cross-party support in this place for such a measure, so why it does not make haste to introduce it is completely beyond my reckoning.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will take an intervention from the cabinet secretary first.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: A practical reason why we need to provide capital expenditure for local authorities is that, if we introduced free school meals for primaries 6 and 7 at this point, while the catering facilities are not available, a cold lunch would be provided in some areas, which would not be as good as the hot lunch that is—thanks to the welfare cuts from down in Westminster—sometimes the only hot meal that a child gets. Such an approach would diminish quality, which is why we are taking our time to get this right. Capital and revenue expenditure are working together to make the provision.

Stephen Kerr: The cabinet secretary again betrays her obsession with blaming other people for the lack of progress that her Government has made on measures that have cross-party support in the chamber.

We support the provision of free school meals during the school holidays for children from eligible families. We would adjust the income threshold to take inflation into account.

We must create the economic conditions for family incomes to rise across Scotland. Research that was published yesterday by the Scottish Trades Union Congress—I admit that it is an unlikely ally—found that Scots have the lowest average take-home pay of people in the United Kingdom. The SNP has presided over a low-growth, low-wage economy since 2007. Last year,

it went into coalition with the Greens, who do not even support the concept of economic growth.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: Can I take one more intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes—briefly.

Stuart McMillan: Will Stephen Kerr tell me which Parliament controls employment legislation?

Stephen Kerr: I am talking about the economy. The reality is that the SNP cannot escape its economic record—it has delivered a low-growth, low-wage economy. The SNP has been in power for 15 years and has made a coalition with a party that does not even accept the concept of economic growth.

I make no bones about it that economic growth is about good jobs—well-paid jobs that allow people to support themselves and their families.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that there must be a change in the Scottish Government's attitude and approach, moving past slogans and self-congratulatory motions to build a high-growth, high-wage economy. In order to do that, the Scottish Conservatives want to create an environment in which Scotland is at the forefront of innovation, enterprise, skills, vocational development and business opportunity. Creating the right economic conditions to increase pay throughout Scotland will mean that families will have more money in their pocket and keep more of their money after tax, which will help them with not only the cost of the school day but all the bills that families throughout Scotland face.

I am sure that the Scottish Conservatives will work with every party in the chamber to help families with the cost of the school day, but we will approach the issue pragmatically, in the knowledge that there is not only one solution. We need a fundamental shift in approach to the question, with greater emphasis being placed on raising broad educational standards and building a high-skill and high-wage economy.

15:25

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): How can I follow that?

At a time when the cost of living crisis is impacting on us all, this debate is incredibly important. There are many things that make me proud to call Scotland my home, including our welcoming approach to Scots old and new and our role as a progressive nation that is brimming with innovation and is confident of its role in the world.

It is my privilege every day to represent my local area, East Lothian, in our national Parliament and to have the opportunity to discuss issues that mean so much to those who live in the constituency. One of the most important issues that I have had the chance to debate, and lead change on, in my role as a member of the Scottish Parliament is ensuring that Scotland is the best place in the world for children to grow up in. That is a passion of mine that I know is shared by members on all sides of the chamber, and it is a priority for our Scottish Government. It is because of that shared passion that the Parliament unanimously passed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, which sought to incorporate the UNCRC into Scots law. Indeed, if we had not been constitutionally prohibited from enacting such legislation, we could have enshrined and fully protected the rights of our children in domestic law.

Article 28 of the UNCRC says that children and young people have the right to education, no matter who they are.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way on that point?

Paul McLennan: I want to get further into my speech, Mr Kerr—I may take an intervention later.

Of course, all children in Scotland are afforded the right to education, free of charge. That educational journey begins when the majority of Scottish children start school, usually between the ages of four and five and a half. It is in primary schools that our children experience the majority of their formative years. Primary schools give our children their first experience of formal learning, which can influence the route that they take through the education system and their success within it; it is undeniable that they are very important places in a child's life.

Secondary schools represent the next chapter in our children's lives. Secondary school is a place where they meet new people, have the opportunity to learn more than they ever have, have new experiences and develop from teenagers into young adults before entering the world. At every stage of Scotland's children's lives, our schools have a huge impact, both positive and negative, on the people that our children become and strive to be.

Why is this debate important? It is important because, although the majority of Scottish children are given the same opportunity to attend school, the school experience, and the cost of the school day, impact children across Scotland very differently. On the face of it, education in Scotland is free, but there are often hidden or extra costs that can act as a barrier to participation in school.

As we all know, school costs can put pressure on low-income families and put children and young people at risk of missing out on opportunities and of feeling different, ashamed and stigmatised. We heard about that from Elena Whitham, and I remember the same feelings from going through school. Uniforms, trips, school lunches, gym kits, pencils and pens and dress-down days can be difficult for low-income families to afford. With one in four children in Scotland in poverty, which works out at around 5,000 children in East Lothian, the scale of poverty-related stigma that some children in our schools may experience should not be underestimated. The universal credit cuts have affected 8,000 families in East Lothian alone, so I will not take lessons from the Conservatives on support for families. That poverty-related stigma, combined with the reality for families with school aged-children, means that the costs that are associated with activities both in school and out of school can place a significant burden on financial resources and increase the cost of living even further.

In recent years, Covid-19 has magnified the already greater risk of poorer educational outcomes and wellbeing, the increased barriers to engagement and the reduced participation in school life that are associated with growing up in poverty. We have already had extensive debate in the chamber about the cost of living crisis that we are living through right now.

Skyrocketing energy prices are impacting families who are on the lowest incomes in our local areas. In my constituency, I have witnessed the number of food bank parcels that are given out across the county doubling on a month-to-month basis. Last month alone, the year-on-year increase was 104 per cent.

Schools alone cannot eradicate child poverty. It is for that reason that the Scottish Government has plans for an entire suite of measures that can prevent and mitigate the effects of poverty. The doubling of the Scottish child payment to £20 a week, with the intention of increasing it to £25 a week, is one example of that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: Do I have enough time to do so, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a wee bit of time in hand, if the member wishes to take the intervention.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the member for taking the intervention. Would he also welcome the doubling of the Scottish child payment for children who are on bridging payments?

Paul McLennan: Of course I do. I know that the member has raised the issue before, and I think that the cabinet secretary or the minister will pick it up when they sum up.

Schools and education services can do their bit to face up to child poverty by tackling the cost of the school day in partnership with other services. That will mitigate the impact of the inequality in health, wellbeing and learning outcomes that our children are experiencing. Of course, alongside those local solutions, the extension of free school meals to all primary school-aged pupils, and the recently announced £1 billion of funding from the Scottish Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap over this parliamentary session, will make a huge difference.

Stephen Kerr: Does the member recognise that there is a problem, as has been mentioned in the debate, with getting the people who need the support access to it? Is that something that we could work on cross party, despite the member's earlier comment about my party and our interest in the welfare of families?

Paul McLennan: That point was about universal credit, but Mr Kerr's point is relevant because there is still a stigma and, as MSPs, we must all work with our local authorities to break down that stigma. There is an issue in that regard, and we all have a role to play.

We learned from the cabinet secretary about the plans around wraparound childcare. We need to level the playing field for children, and striving for an education system that has pupil equity throughout it is undoubtedly a goal for us all, regardless of where we sit in the chamber.

I will finish with this key point: unequal access to learning and opportunities at school means unequal outcomes for our children. It is crucial that every child is able to make the most of their school day, and the Scottish Government is helping to make that happen.

15:32

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Just last month, the Scottish Government published the second tackling child poverty delivery plan. We, on the Scottish Labour benches, recognise the action that has been taken to date. However, although the plan contains some good ideas, we share the concerns of many organisations that most of the ideas are little more than that—they are ideas that are presented without plans or actions.

Despite whatever the Government has done to date, experts still say that, on a good day, we might just scrape to the relative poverty target but we will definitely miss three out of four of the child poverty targets. That means that, this time next

year, 120,000 children will still live in absolute poverty and be unable to pay to meet their very basic needs.

It is clear that the actions of the Government right now are not enough. Warm words will not pay bills. If the Government does not pick up the pace and scale, hundreds of thousands of children in Scotland will be on a path to destitution. That grim reality is only the tip of the iceberg. It gets worse when we look at priority families. The Government's failure to provide targeted support to those families also means that households with a disabled person in them, single parent families and black and minority ethnic families face disproportionately high levels of deprivation, and the child poverty plan does little for them.

It is about children and human rights. An adequate standard of living is a right under the Human Rights Act 1998, the UNCRC and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Yet, tens of thousands of children are not able to realise that right. Those treaties also protect a right to education, and I am proud to live in a country where that education is free. Thanks to previous Scottish Labour and Liberal Democrat Administrations here, in Scotland, that continues all the way to university. However, the fact that every child has a place at school does not mean that each child is able to enjoy the experience equally. Children cannot learn when they are hungry. Our cost of living package, backed by money in people's pockets, is why we asked the Government to make the Scottish child payment £40 in April next year and why we called on it to do more for those who are on low incomes and in the squeezed middle.

Neither the Tories at Westminster nor the SNP in Scotland have done enough to mitigate the effects of rising food and fuel prices. They have ignored our calls, and families are buckling under the pressure. For too many people who live in poverty, or even for those who are just about managing to stay afloat, the cost of going to school and fully realising the right to education is something that they cannot afford.

Third sector organisations are doing their best to step up and plug gaps by providing hardship funds to people who have nowhere else to turn. I thank them for their incredible work this and every year. Organisations such as Aberlour have given out £1.5 million to more than 6,000 people, to help them to cover basic necessities. In truth, it should not be down to those organisations.

The basics that pupils need are a uniform, a school bag, a pencil case, stationary, indoor and outdoor shoes, lunches, and to be able to travel to school. Although initiatives are in place, including some Government ones, to help with some of that, such as free school meals, and although there are

pre-loved uniform and kit banks, using those often comes with stigma, which is felt by both parents and children. Furthermore, they do not reach or work for everyone.

Some families who just miss out on free school meals are unable to pay the rate for a basic daily meal, never mind being able to include extra for additional treats that other children can afford. With the rising cost of living and increasing food prices, those who were just about managing to provide packed lunches are now struggling to do so—at least to the nutritional standards that children need. Too often, children are hiding their lunch boxes or eating separately from their friends in order to hide what they have got or not got.

Such initiatives make children feel different from and less than their peers. Sometimes, their peers make them feel that way. It does not have to be like that. Reducing stigma, which is crucial, is possible. Many schools operate a card-based system in which children can top up either online or with cash. Children on free school meals automatically receive credit, which means that they use the same method of payment at the front of the lunch queue as their friends.

No child should be handed a letter chasing them for debts or for being unable to pay for their lunch. Interactions with schools and payment processes should all be via parents. Schools and local authorities should be reaching out to parents, establishing where support is needed and offering it. Hard-working teachers and school staff know how to do that. They know their pupils well. They are a line of defence against children going hungry. Collaborative working is vital to ensuring that, when parents are struggling, the school can point them in the right direction for additional support via local authorities, citizens advice bureaux and third sector organisations in a way that is not judgmental or stigmatising. However, the more that school, council and third sector budgets are cut, the harder it is to do that and to support families.

Furthermore, schools that mandate specific uniforms and physical education kits from particular suppliers should consider being more flexible and allowing a generic style, thereby making it easier for parents to look for cost-sensitive options. One school in my region demands a uniform that costs almost £100 an outfit, whereas others are more flexible, meaning that parents can easily pick up much cheaper alternatives.

Lastly, I will mention school trips, clubs and special celebrations and events. I am sure that many of us can recount our favourite such experiences, but they fill many families with dread as they come up in the school calendar. For some, participating in them is simply unthinkable. The

budget restraints that schools face mean that more and more children are having to pay to attend or to cover supplies at extracurricular clubs. Families see their children missing out as they watch others participating in experiences with no feasible way of doing so themselves.

Trips to parks, museums, libraries and leisure facilities are, of course, a good alternative, but they are possible only when those places are open and accessible. I know only too well that, in my region, diminishing council budgets mean that those are the first places to be cut and those options are no longer available to schools. The people's palace is a prime example. I hope that Glasgow City Council will pledge to ensure that the palace is never again forced to close its doors.

The cost of the school day is too often hidden, but its effects are not. Not properly considering the cost of the school day when we celebrate the right to freedom of education leaves children facing stigma and prejudice and being made to feel different. Just as children cannot learn when they are hungry, they cannot learn to their full potential when they feel judged or stigmatised. We do not need miracles to change that; we need innovation, proper funding for councils, money in people's pockets and real action to tackle child poverty and the cost of living crisis.

15:38

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate reflecting on the many vital actions that the Scottish Government is taking to reduce the cost of the school day for children from low-income families.

I welcome the Government's recognition that the state of affairs is unacceptable. The motion demonstrates the Government's commitment to ensuring that children can participate fully in all aspects of school life without additional financial costs. Education should, of course, be free for all children.

As a teacher with 30 years' experience in the classroom, I have seen the impact on the child who is not able to go to the Christmas fayre or who is left in the classroom because they do not have a ticket or they do not have 30p to adopt a soft toy. I note the thoughtfulness of teachers in giving their own money to children to enable them to buy popcorn or guess how many sweets are in the jar.

In fact, teachers, in collaboration with parent councils, have long been aware of the need to ensure that no child is excluded. I am sure that we all remember participating in sponsored walks and asking friends and family to contribute. Perhaps some of us would have provided more benefit by taking part in sponsored silences. Not wanting to

come across as a total Miss Trunchbull, I accept and believe that those activities are a vital component of the school day and calendar. They contribute to the school and the wider community in so many fun ways. Of course, all children should participate fully, but without experiencing the stigma of not having the financial resource.

The Child Poverty Action Group's cost of the school day campaign focuses on raising awareness of disproportionate and hidden costs from dress-down days to dressing-up days, charity support days and other fundraising events. It also highlights the cost of basic necessities such as stationery, uniform, food and transport and provides a wealth of creative ways for schools to identify and tackle those costs. I participated in the pilot training programme in Glasgow, and not only did it challenge my assumptions but it led the school to have a wider re-evaluation of the school calendar of events in order to cut out any additional expenses for children and families.

The Scottish Government has rightly committed substantial funds to addressing the cost of the school day, including uniforms, meals and transport. The school uniform grant currently stands at £120 per eligible primary child and £150 per eligible secondary young person, and £11.8 million of additional funding has been provided to local authorities to enable that.

All children from P1 to P5 and eligible children in P6 and P7 have been in receipt of free school lunches since January. I welcome the fact that the provision will be extended to all children in primary and special schools in the course of this session of Parliament. It should be noted that the policy of providing universal free school meals saves all families an average of £400 per child per year.

The level of child poverty in Scotland is 6 percentage points below the UK average, standing at 24 per cent compared with 30 per cent in England and 31 per cent in Wales. It matches the level in Northern Ireland, which is also 24 per cent. Furthermore, child poverty in Scotland is projected to fall to its lowest level in nearly 30 years as a result of the actions that have been taken by the Scottish Government to date and commitments in the second tackling child poverty delivery plan.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Kaukab Stewart: I will just crack on. I am nearly done.

Other examples of game-changing Scottish Government action on child poverty include doubling the child payment to £20, increasing it to £25 and extending it to all children in low-income families up to the age of 16 by the end of this year. The Child Poverty Action Group has reported that the cost of bringing up a child in Scotland will be

reduced by 31 per cent—nearly £24,000 a year—once the Scottish child payment is doubled and the expansion of free school meals provision is fully delivered.

However, those actions are being taken in the face of a UK Tory Government that seems to be determined to increase inequality instead of reducing it, so the Scottish Government is trying to deal with the issue with one hand tied behind its back. Inequality is a blight on Scotland and it is a blight on the whole of the UK. The difference is that we, in Scotland, have a Government that understands that and takes action to address it. I therefore welcome the motion and think that even Miss Honey would defer to the words of Kofi Annan:

“There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace.”

15:44

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Too often we talk about education as the route out of poverty and the great leveller between people of different backgrounds. It clearly has a huge role to play, but those kinds of statements are often made without any acknowledgement of the wider structural inequalities in society, which mean that even the most academically gifted and high-achieving young person from a disadvantaged background is likely to be disadvantaged for the rest of their life, compared with their peers from more affluent backgrounds, even if those peers achieve far less in terms of traditional qualifications at school.

That is a line of argument that leads to us treating teachers and school support staff as something between social workers and miracle workers who are expected to cure all the societal injustices, as a result of which, as they enter the classroom each morning, too many children and young people already suffer. We cannot eradicate poverty through our schools, whatever policies we adopt and however much money we spend in them, and it would be desperately unfair to already overwhelmed school staff—not to mention children and their families—if we were to try to do so.

However, in a wider holistic plan, schools have a really important role in tackling and eliminating child poverty. At the very least, policies and support mechanisms should be in place to prevent them from making inequality worse. The Educational Institute of Scotland has produced excellent resources on that issue in recent years; I strongly recommend its poverty-proofing schools packs to every school and council in the country. The objective of poverty proofing our schools and reducing the cost of the school day is at the heart

of the Scottish Government’s agenda and, in particular, of the Bute house agreement that was reached last year by the Greens and the SNP.

Capping the cost of school uniforms via statutory guidance is a policy that I was proud to take from the Scottish Greens manifesto into the programme for government. Across far too many schools and council areas, there are unnecessarily prescriptive uniform requirements and exclusive agreements with certain suppliers that serve only to drive up the cost of uniforms, which puts a greater burden on low-income and larger families. In the previous parliamentary session, the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee took extensive evidence on the matter, and heard examples about mandatory blazers with unnecessary braiding, needlessly specific physical education uniforms and other policies that were, and still are, harming some of the most vulnerable families in schools’ communities.

Martin Whitfield: Will Ross Greer confirm that the guidance should extend to cover protective PE sports equipment, without which it would be dangerous for children to participate in some sports? That is often left out in discussions of the issue.

Ross Greer: That is a really important point. I was not the sporty one in my family, but my brother would certainly strongly agree with that sentiment, as would my parents, due to the cost of providing for my brother’s enthusiasm for every sport under the sun. When the statutory guidance is scoped out, that will be an important point to consider.

The increase in the school clothing grant is a welcome step, particularly in the context of rising inflation. However, in and of itself, it could never be the solution. Without creating statutory guidance to cap the cost of school uniforms in the first place, the uniform grant would amount to ever-increasing subsidy of the companies that produce unnecessarily expensive uniforms. Therefore, I look forward to production of guidance, and to the opportunities that it will provide us with to tackle many other inequalities that the cabinet secretary mentioned—for example, around the financial impact on young women and girls of needlessly gendered uniform policies.

The expansion of free school meals is another cornerstone policy in the agenda. Universal free school meals in primary schools were first agreed to as part of the last budget deal between the Greens and the SNP in the previous parliamentary session and, despite the challenges of the pandemic, the policy roll-out continues. Every child in primary 1 through to P5 has access to a free meal at school, with entitlement for P6 and P7 children following as soon as possible.

I understand completely the calls for the roll-out to be sped up. That was the Scottish Government's original plan. However, quite fairly, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said that it needed more time and money to make the necessary changes to school kitchens and other facilities in order to meet increased demand. Funding has been provided this year through £35 million in capital funds, so I hope that the expansion to all primary school year groups can now take place as quickly as possible.

Paul O'Kane: Does Ross Greer accept that, in large authorities with expanding school populations, such as East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire, there will be a requirement for further capital funding to ensure that school lunches can be provided within lunch time? I am thinking, in particular, of Mearns primary school in Newton Mearns, where there are upwards of 1,500 pupils to be fed over the lunch period.

Ross Greer: I agree that need is not exactly the same in every local authority, particularly in respect of local authorities with growing populations such as the two that Paul O'Kane just mentioned, which we both represent. There is a need for continued funding to ensure that support is available.

Another policy that has made it from the Scottish Greens' manifesto into the Government's programme is the expansion of family-income maximisation services that are attached to schools. For all the other important initiatives through which we support low-income families, the single most effective thing that can be done to help, and which gives families the most dignity and respect, is that we increase their income.

The healthier, wealthier children programme, which NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has been running since October 2010, is an excellent example of that. As at August 2020, the financial gain for families was estimated at £36.5 million from 27,000 referrals. That is an average of £1,350 going to families who were entitled to it but were not, for whatever reason, already accessing it. I know that similar schemes in other areas have achieved similar levels of success.

The Bute house agreement will mean that funding for family-income maximisation services increases by £10 million during this session of Parliament. That will not all take place through schools, but they will play a critical role, because schools are—not always, but often—the only route through which some families have a trusting relationship with the state.

Despite the wide range of measures that are listed in the motion, and the others that the Government is undertaking, it is entirely right for organisations such as the Child Poverty Action

Group and the Scottish Youth Parliament to push for the work to go further and faster. I see that that point is made in Labour's amendment. That is exactly what the Government constantly asks of itself: members should look at the new "Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026", which commits to a further increase in the Scottish child payment to £25, and to action to mitigate the UK Government's cruel benefit cap. That is another Green manifesto commitment that I am proud to see being implemented.

Eradication of child poverty is a mission that unites all of us in this Parliament. With the caveats that I mentioned earlier, schools have a critical role to play in that effort. The Government's agenda is ambitious, but I am glad to see that there is a collective desire to go further. I look forward to discussions about how exactly we will do that in the months ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I remind members who hope to speak in the debate to ensure that their card is in and that they have pressed their request-to-speak button.

15:50

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate about reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families.

The SNP Government has made a raft of direct interventions to help low-income families. Those include the newly doubled Scottish child payment and the three best start grants—those being the pregnancy and baby payment, the early learning payment and the school age payment. Taken together with the best start foods grant, all that is worth more than £10,000 to low-income families by the time their first child turns six. I also point out that we see today that, for those who qualify for the Scottish child payment, the Scottish Government will now automate the early learning and school-age payments. That is significant progress.

It is worth noting that there is a difference of more than £8,200 for every eligible child born in Scotland, compared with similar initiatives in England and Wales. That is a real difference. Of course we want to, and we must, do more in Scotland. The debate has outlined some of the ways in which the Scottish Government intends to do that. We are also hearing other suggestions, as is right.

However, I have a cynical reason for comparing the Scottish Government's priorities for low-income families to those of the UK Government, in particular. It is not to make a party-political point: it

is self-evident that Scotland's ambitions, plans, priorities and resourcing decisions go far beyond anything that the UK Government is doing. There is much cross-party support for SNP plans, as is suggested by the nature of the Labour amendment. I will say more about that later.

The debate in Scotland has moved on from questioning universal free school meals, universal free prescriptions and universal free access to higher education. Labour once described that as a "something for nothing society". The debate has moved on dramatically, and I welcome Labour coming on board with the SNP. When compared to the devastatingly harmful and retrograde step of the UK Government's decision to withdraw the £20 uplift in universal credit—a decision that has hammered some of our most vulnerable and struggling households—it is clear that we have, together and across parties, set out a different and more progressive path for Scotland.

I want to compare the decisions that have been taken here in Scotland with those that have been taken at Westminster, because I want to urge Westminster to take a similar approach. Not only would such initiatives benefit families in England to the tune of an additional £8,300 for every child by the time they turn six, but because of the way Scotland is financed via Barnett consequentials, it would release another £225 million of Scotland's own money to reinvest in those initiatives and to further tackle child poverty and the cost of the school day. That would be the case by dint of how Scotland is financed. We need England to adopt those policies so that Scotland can go further.

I am proud of the priorities that have been set and the achievements that have been secured by the Scottish Government through working on a cross-party basis. Many of the measures have been targeted at people on the lowest incomes. I want to reflect on the Scottish Government's important and increasingly universal approach in its provision of free school meals. In 2015, the Scottish Government delivered universal free school meals for pupils in P1 to P3 and, by January this year, that had been extended to pupils up to the end of P5. Before the end of this parliamentary session, free school meals will be provided for all children in primary school.

I put it on the record that I see the natural end point being universal free school meals for children irrespective of the school setting, but I suspect that that will happen beyond the end of the current session of Parliament. Of course, there is also the addition of the targeted approach of provision of free school meals for children outwith the groups that will qualify universally.

The scale of universal provision should not be underestimated. Some 274,000 children between P1 and P5 are automatically registered to qualify

for free school meals—if they take up the offer, of course. I say to Mr Kerr that I accept that take-up is an issue that we should look at. The Scottish Government invests over £95 million to provide universal free school meals, but it is about more than that; it is also about tackling stigma. There is a cost to the school day, but there is also a cost to stigma, given the impact that it has on education. This is about the young person having the right to a school meal not because they are poor, but because they have the right, as a young person, to a free nutritious school meal in the first place. That is a dignified approach and a key child-welfare approach.

I rarely make personal contributions in the chamber, because I am in a privileged position, including in respect of my income, but I remember very well my experience of free school meals in the 1980s. Children were sent to the end of the queue if they had lost their dinner ticket. I also remember selling my dinner ticket so that I knew what it was like to have cash in my pocket for the first time. The Scottish child payment dramatically impacts on the quality of life of young people who are living in poverty. However, I hate mentioning those things because I am now, quite frankly, in a privileged position.

The Labour amendment gives a nod to universality regarding, for example, "the universal availability of summer clubs".

Much good work has already been going on in that area, including for the past five years through the holiday hunger programme of Glasgow City Council, which is run by the SNP. I represent the constituency of Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn: Cadder, Royston, Summerston, Lambhill, Ruchill, Milton, Wyndford, Maryhill—I will continue, Presiding Officer—Springburn, Possilpark, Parkhouse and Wester Common all have individual sites where summer clubs will be run this summer, with free access to food for all who want to go along and take part in the activities that will be run by the third sector. That will be hugely successful.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. You should bring your remarks to a close.

Bob Doris: In that case, I apologise to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

I think that there is more consensus in the debate than we might realise. I am pleased to be part of that, as we work together to reduce the cost of the school day for all the young people whom we represent.

15:57

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to be contributing to this important debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I express my support for the amendment that was lodged by my colleague Oliver Mundell.

We often come into the chamber and judge the performance of our education system based on attainment, but rarely do we get a chance to discuss the factors that make attainment possible. For the hours that are spent in school to be worth while and effective, pupils' only concern should be learning. I find it rather distressing when I hear accounts of children from low-income families who have felt embarrassed, stressed, ashamed or outcast during their time at school due to their financial circumstances.

Clare Haughey: I hear what Pam Gosal says. She feels distressed when she hears about children whose lives are impacted by poverty. Will she join me in condemning her Tory counterparts at Westminster, who have imposed that poverty on many of the children and families in Scotland?

Pam Gosal: I thank the minister for her intervention. However, I think that it was said earlier that the SNP Scottish Government needs to stop hiding behind the UK Government. We are talking about failures here, which were mentioned earlier. It is not just the ferry fiasco that the Scottish Government has thrown money away on. We are talking about the malicious prosecution of Rangers, about the hospitals and about money that could be spent—*[Interruption.]* Excuse me; I am speaking. We are talking about money that could be spent today on issues that are important to our children. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Ms Gosal, hold on a second. Could members on the front bench stop having a slanging match while Ms Gosal is trying to speak, please?

Pam Gosal: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I fear that recently announced changes to funding for the Scottish attainment challenge will result in further examples of what I have talked about in my region. The changes to the attainment challenge funding model will result in pupil equity funding for West Dunbartonshire—a council with the fourth highest level of child poverty in the country—being cut by about £850,000 per year by 2025.

In fact, an analysis by Audit Scotland that was published in 2021 showed that, if we exclude attainment Scotland funds, spending on education in nearly all attainment challenge areas fell from 2013 to 2019. Such money can be crucial in helping to cover the cost of the school day for

pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, so we continue to disagree with the reduction in key attainment challenge funding.

I welcome the increase in school clothing grants for primary and secondary school pupils, and the full best start, bright futures plan includes some commendable ideas. However, members can understand my cautious optimism in relation to some measures, such as Scottish Government promises to provide digital devices to every schoolchild by 2026. We need the Scottish Government to make good on its promises immediately, not in four years.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I am sorry, but I would rather finish my speech.

I am surprised by the appearance of that pledge in the Government's motion, which suggests that the roll-out of digital devices so far is something to be applauded. Earlier, the cabinet secretary spoke about devices being delivered. However, in my region, more than 80 per cent of pupils in West Dunbartonshire and more than 90 per cent of pupils in East Dunbartonshire are still waiting for a digital device. The initial roll-out stemmed from the pandemic, but the very slow delivery of devices has had little to no impact on reducing digital poverty, so it is now imperative that pupils who have missed out are able to catch up. Therefore, I urge the Scottish Government to back our calls for a national tutoring scheme, which we have championed for more than a year and which could make a real difference to young people's education.

In relation to the removal of music tuition fees, some councils were giving music lessons for free, but charges in most local authority areas had been increasing over the past 10 years because of cuts to core council funding. Although we welcome the removal of charges, we wish that that had not been necessitated by the legacy of SNP cuts to core local government funding.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome commitments to ensuring that low-income families do not incur costs for curriculum-related trips. We want to take things a step further, so I urge every member across the chamber to back my colleague Liz Smith as she takes forward her member's bill, which would make it a statutory requirement for local authorities to offer 12 to 16-year-olds at least one week of residential outdoor education. That point was highlighted by Kaukab Stewart in relation to trips outside of school.

Reducing the attainment gap is a key priority for the Scottish Conservatives. We believe that children from all backgrounds should be on an equal footing when it comes to attainment. We can do that by investing £1 billion in reducing the

attainment gap and ensuring that funding is allocated effectively; by speeding up the roll-out of digital devices and introducing a national tutoring scheme to help pupils to catch up; and, last but not least, by maximising efforts to ensure that pupils' only concern when they are at school is learning.

16:04

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a serving councillor on Stirling Council.

I grew up a child of a single mum on a poor council estate in Ayr, so I have some understanding of poverty and the challenges that families face today. My mum worked part time in Greggs, and to give me a real school uniform every year, she had to purchase it on credit at an exorbitant interest rate. We relied heavily on school meals so that I got at least one decent meal a day.

All through my school years, clothes and toys were in short supply—for example, I did not own my own bicycle until I could afford to buy one at the age of 22. I often felt excluded at school as others enjoyed trips or had the latest fashions, and we have heard much about that stigma in the debate.

I recall that the benefits system at the time was certainly not generous, and we came to rely on child benefit. I will never forget the look on my mum's face when one day I managed to lose the payment on my way back from the post office; after all these years, that look still haunts me.

I have had first-hand experience of the hard choices and challenges that families who are living on the breadline face, and as a result, I am determined that all children should have a good start in life. That is part of the reason that I got into politics. If you put yourself in the shoes of a low-income family, it is not hard to see why tackling child poverty is the number 1 priority for the SNP and our Government.

Children from poorer households do not suffer only from a lack of material things or decent food; they get bullied at school for having less, which impacts on their enjoyment of school and ability to succeed there. Leaving school without making the most of opportunities is likely to result in a vicious cycle of poverty.

A child's experiences of school and their family's income are strongly linked. In 2007, a Joseph Rowntree Foundation study found that schoolchildren from poorer families had "narrower and less rich experiences" and that

"children in disadvantaged schools had limited access to music, art and out-of-school activities".

Alarmingly, the study also highlighted that

"Poorer children in the study accepted that they were not going to get the same quality of schooling, or the same outcomes, as better-off children."

Every child should have the same opportunities, and I know that the Scottish Government is committed to making a fairer society for all. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which passed unanimously, set out targets to reduce the number of children experiencing the effects of poverty by 2030. Since the act was passed, the SNP and the Scottish Government have worked with charities, think tanks and the education community to break down the financial barriers that a quarter of our children face.

The cost of a school day for children from low-income families is now mitigated by measures such as free breakfast clubs, free school meals, a uniform allowance and support for more parents with free childcare so that they can go to work and earn more for their families. It is good to see the shared priorities of local and national Government make an impact. In my constituency, Stirling Council has introduced breakfast clubs, clothing grants and other measures to help families, and the Scottish Government has introduced progressive policies such as increasing the Scottish child payment, which 1,360 children across Stirling have benefited from. Our *raison d'être* is to help struggling families.

Think tanks and anti-poverty campaigners are generally in agreement that the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy could make a huge difference by maximising household resources and improving children's wellbeing and life chances. However, although our progress and commitment have been good, a question remains: how do we ensure that that progress is not undone by the growing cost of living crisis, unhelped by a woefully ignorant UK Tory Government? It is shameful that the Tories ruthlessly cut the £20 universal credit uplift at a time when families were at their lowest point.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published its "Welfare reform report: Impact on families with children", which estimates that 70,000 people in Scotland, including 30,000 children, would be lifted out of poverty by 2024 if the UK Government welfare reforms that have been introduced since 2015 were reversed.

Due to a number of mitigation policies in Scotland, which put people before profit, the child poverty rate here is notably lower, at 24 per cent, than the 30 per cent rate in England. In Scotland, there is a focus on the availability of social housing, as well as local government schemes

such as the Scottish welfare fund and council tax reduction, which help to prevent destitution.

However, I am concerned that the pandemic and on-going cost of living crisis will make our targets difficult to meet unless additional support is provided by Westminster or—ultimately—we achieve independence and control our financial levers.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Evelyn Tweed: I am sorry; I am just about to finish.

Our promises provide hope; implementing them is key. I am proud to say that Scotland is now a much better place for low-income children than it was when I was a youngster, thanks to the SNP.

When we invest in our children's welfare, we invest in the welfare of all. I welcome the motion.

16:11

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate about what can be done to assist with the cost of the school day, especially at a time when families across Scotland are struggling with the cost of living crisis, which has seen the biggest fall in living standards since records began.

It is important that we take a planned approach and ensure that everything feasible is done to reduce the costs that families face, including the cost of the school day.

The approach that the Scottish Government has set out is welcome and will greatly assist many families in Scotland. It is in tune with our national mission to eradicate child poverty.

I welcome the investment in removing barriers to education, including the removal of core curriculum costs for all primary and secondary pupils, which will ensure that families do not have to meet the costs of resources and materials for practical lessons.

The change in mindset that the cost of the school day approach is bringing about will remove other financial barriers to education. If the approach is to be successful, we must listen to parents and act on the issues that they identify. In schools, we need a mindset whereby headteachers and staff are aware of the potential unintended implications of seeking money to facilitate school activities and events.

I have seen at first hand the effectiveness of such an approach, in my role as a councillor on West Dunbartonshire Council—I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. In West Dunbartonshire, every

headteacher has undertaken training on the impact of poverty and adversity on children and families. All schools have undertaken training on mitigating the costs of the school day. All schools are committed to working with parents and partners to address the challenges of poverty and to reduce the barriers to inclusion that result from poverty.

In addition, a multi-agency group of staff has worked together to produce a resource on the cost of the school day, which reflects surveys of parents' views. The resource provides support and guidance to establishments. It highlights barriers and ways to overcome them. A short-life working group is leading authority-wide developments to address inequality and support establishments to do so with their school communities.

It is clear to me that our schools are committed to reducing financial and other barriers to education. The step change that such an approach makes should not be underestimated. Parents are being listened to and their concerns have secured necessary change.

We must match that step change by continuing to roll out policy that puts money in families' pockets and gives them the financial support that they need. That is especially important during the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. It is why, in West Dunbartonshire, we took the decision to double the school clothing grant to £300. It is why the Scottish Government has doubled the Scottish child payment, which will increase to £25. It is why we have uprated Scottish benefits by 6 per cent, when the Westminster Government has uprated benefits by only half that rate. I take this opportunity to call on the UK Government to do the right thing and follow our approach to uprating.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: In line with such an approach to uprating, will the member also support a doubling of the carers allowance supplement, so that that, too, can be uprated?

Marie McNair: I will certainly look at that.

I also welcome the decision to mitigate the benefit cap. That Westminster policy deliberately deprives families with children of the basic subsistence levels in the UK social security system. Our commitment to free school meals is also massively important in reducing the cost of school, while providing nutritional meals to our young people. Important, too, is the continuation of the education maintenance allowance when it was scrapped in other parts of the UK. Also, one of our best start grants is paid when a child starts school, in recognition that that is a time that puts more financial pressure on families with children. It is no surprise, then, that the Child Poverty Action Group points out in its report, "The cost of a child in

Scotland", that the combined value of Scottish Government policies and lower childcare costs will "reduce the net cost of bringing up a child by up to 31 per cent (nearly £24,000) for low-income families".

There is a wide financial package available to reduce the cost of the school day and support families in a wider setting, but it is not enough. We must maximise take-up of that approach through access to advice, and innovative approaches that minimise bureaucracy. As the Child Poverty Action Group points out, that support is one of the positive things achieved from the cost of the school day approach. I welcome the continued commitment to that by the Scottish Government, and local actions across Clydebank and Milngavie.

I whole-heartedly welcome the Scottish Government's support for a cost of the school day approach and pay tribute to all schools across my constituency—our teachers, all staff in our schools and our senior education officers—for their commitment and compassion, and their determination to ensure that unnecessary costs are removed from the school curriculum and that financial barriers are removed, so that access to education is not shaped by people's ability to pay.

16:16

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Like the two previous speakers, I declare an interest, perhaps for the last time. I am a serving councillor in East Renfrewshire Council.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate and begin by praising the excellent work of our schools and the many dedicated staff who work in them day in, day out. Schools are so much more than just places of learning. I am sure that we can all agree that, in our communities, schools are at the very centre of supporting children and young people, and their families, to grow and thrive in a safe and supported environment. I am sure that we have all had experience of the wider role that schools can play in bringing communities together and meeting people where they are, in order to work as hard as possible with them to respond to their needs. That means all children and all families, and a relentless focus on breaking down the barriers to achieving the full potential of every learner.

In preparing for the debate, I have been thinking about the genuine transformative power that a young person's experiences in and around school life can have on them. My mum taught in a primary school for 40 years and still speaks about many of the young people she taught and supported to experience the world both inside and outwith the classroom: a child has the opportunity to learn a musical instrument and performs for their classmates for the first time; a child learns to swim

and takes to the deep end on their own for the first time; or a child takes a school trip away from home for the first time, to Iona or on an Outward Bound adventure, and wonders at history or nature.

It may seem simple, but there is power in those things. As the Child Poverty Action Group has pointed out in its work on in-school poverty, children are missing out on having fun. It is more fundamental than that, though. Children are often missing out on being themselves and learning about themselves. That is why I commend the work done by CPAG on supporting schools to think about how to make those experiences as accessible and cost neutral as possible—something that teachers such as my mum and many others have been doing for many years.

However, we know that with diminishing financial resources that is becoming harder and harder. We know that it often falls to staff, parent councils, charities, churches and others to help plug the gap. We also know that the costs of the fundamentals of the school day—uniforms, physical education kit, food, equipment and digital access—all continue to rise. That is why it is right that the Government has worked with COSLA on increasing the school clothing grant and expanded the provision of free school meals.

However, it is clear that councils have also gone above and beyond in extremely difficult circumstances. Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council has combated holiday hunger with club 365 and has provided the first-ever clothing grant for nursery children. I am sure that Bob Doris either forgot to mention or did not get around to mentioning North Lanarkshire Council, and I will not mention all the communities in North Lanarkshire that are benefiting from that holiday hunger programme—I will let other colleagues do that.

Bob Doris: I am sure that the member will want to concur that great work is being done across all local authorities to address these issues. Much of the stuff in the Labour amendment is already taking place across Scotland—it is happening in SNP Glasgow and, as the member says, in North Lanarkshire, too.

Paul O'Kane: My point is that councils have gone above and beyond to help to deliver much of the agenda that we are talking about. Labour-led North Ayrshire Council, in my region, has invested in a scheme directed at tackling the cost of the school day, with £500,000 already invested to overcome the key financial barriers to participation at school for children from low-income houses. That involves looking at delivering equal access to food, clothing and digital resources in order to poverty proof the school day. I know that we have

heard from other colleagues about where that is happening in other parts of the country, too.

However, those councils are struggling to deliver all that in the face of years of cuts from the Scottish Government. The Government's motion speaks about the removal of core curriculum charges and about myriad initiatives. However, much of that is simply replacing money that has already been stripped from education budgets, as we have heard already.

Pam Gosal: Does the member believe that a slow roll-out of the digital devices to pupils in Scotland has little or no impact on digital poverty? In West Dunbartonshire and East Dunbartonshire, areas that I am interested in, more than 80 or 90 per cent of the devices are still to be delivered. Does the member believe that the SNP Scottish Government is failing the pupils of Scotland?

Paul O'Kane: I thank my regional colleague for that intervention. There is clearly concern about the pace at which the devices are being rolled out. Last year and during the lockdown period, it was fundamentally important that young people could get access to digital devices, so that they could learn from home. I know from my experience on East Renfrewshire Council that the roll-out of money from the Scottish Government has been slow and patchy, and I think that we would all like to see progress being made on that. I hope that the minister will be able to say something in her concluding remarks about what progress the Scottish Government intends to make on ensuring that the policy is delivered. It is all very well saying that there will be a device for every child, but we need to know when that is going to happen.

As has already been said, many of the policies are just headlines and have not been delivered, and timescales are slipping. We know about what is happening with free lunches, but, in many local authority areas, breakfast clubs were cut years ago and local authorities have not been given appropriate capital funding to deliver increased dining space. We talk about free instrumental tuition, but many bands and orchestras have already folded and work to reach the poorest children with music tuition stopped. As we have just heard, the Government announced the provision of a digital device for every child, but hundreds are still waiting. Further, council family learning services and outreach have been decimated.

It is clear that we need to look at the fundamentals in order to tackle poverty in our schools and in our communities. We need childcare that supports people to access learning and the labour market, with councils and partner providers fully funded to deliver with the genuine flexibility that was promised and is required. We need wraparound childcare not just in the early

years, but also in primary, before and after school, where we know that the cost of childcare can be exorbitant.

Given the context of Covid-19, we need a recovery that works for everyone. That means universal availability of holiday clubs and extracurricular activities to help all our children and young people bounce back, particularly in terms of their mental health and wellbeing.

All evidence shows that addressing issues of poverty during childhood and in schools vastly increases the life chances of those raised in low income households. Poverty touches all areas of life and Scottish Labour believes that fighting to end poverty should be the key priority of everything that we do in this Parliament, and that begins with our youngest citizens.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jim Fairlie will be the final speaker in the open debate. I remind all members who have participated in the debate that they need to be present for the start of the closing speeches.

16:24

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I remember getting free school dinners at school. I did not think anything of it—why would I?—until someone pointed out to me that that meant that I must be poor, despite the fact that my dad was a student who worked two jobs, and my mum was working as well.

That is where stigma kicks in. That stigma makes you feel like you are a charity case and that others can access things that are simply not for you. I take Bob Doris's point about talking about personal matters in the chamber when we are well paid, but it is important that we talk about them, because we need to ensure that people understand that we are talking from personal understanding.

That stigma not only makes you feel bad but can lead to problems with your learning. Children develop an attitude of questioning what their worth is in the education system, and that can affect their ambition. Their attainment narrows, as does their sense of the options and opportunities that are open to them. "That's only for other folk," becomes the automatic thought.

Another sharp memory that I have from my school days that is relevant to the debate is my headmaster coming into the class in primary 7 to tell us that the school was arranging a four-day trip to York, which sounded brilliant. However, it cost £40. I did not even tell my parents about it. When they found out, they were gutted that I should be so aware of family financial constraints that I had put it out of my head straight away. My dad might

be furious that I am raising it in the debate, but we have to talk about such stuff. I should add that my parents found the £40 and I had a fantastic trip to York, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

We must recognise and tackle the impact that poverty and the stigma of poverty can have on a child's education and, as importantly, a child's self-worth and belief in themselves. We need to ensure that education is not something that people buy. An education is not just about the academics but about the whole-school experience. Schools should enrich our children, not make them feel poorer. School should be a place where they feel that they belong, not somewhere where they are made to feel that they are not good enough because they do not have enough money.

That is why the steps that the Scottish Government is taking and which are recognised in the motion are important. Getting a child kitted out for school can be a daunting prospect, but measures such as increasing the school clothing grant and producing guidance to reduce school uniform costs for families help. In my school days, we all went to pick berries during the summer holidays. That is how we paid for our uniforms.

You cannot get properly educated if you are hungry. Billy Kay would recognise the phrase "a hungersome wean has nae lugs". That is where breakfast clubs and nutritious school meals play a key role. Universal provision removes the stigma that attaches to such provision.

I do not want families on fixed incomes and tight budgets to experience the sinking feeling when they open their child's schoolbag and find a letter about a school trip or a music lesson that means that they will have to find money to pay for it or find a way to let their child down without making them feel bad. I do not want parents to have to think up an excuse to get their child out of doing cooking classes because they cannot pay for the contributions to the ingredients.

The Scottish Government's commitment to removing core curriculum charges, ensuring that low-income families do not face costs for curriculum-related trips and abolishing fees for instrumental music tuition are important in that regard. Other steps that are not mentioned in the motion and which will help to ease the cost of the school day for folk are being taken. Attending after-school clubs or sports training sessions used to mean that, because the child would miss the free school bus home, travel would have to come out of the normal household budget. That is no longer the case because, under the SNP Government, children now get to travel free on buses.

Martin Whitfield: Does Jim Fairlie share my concern that travel costs for trips during the day

are excessive and place a huge financial burden on schools that is not being alleviated by the free bus pass?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely concur that any extra cost that is put on a family in the cost of living crisis is terrible. However, as Ross Greer pointed out, the school education system cannot sort out the problems of poverty.

The introduction and recent doubling of the child payment is an incredibly helpful boost to low-income families. Today, plans were announced to automatically pay the best start grant, early learning and school age payments to parents and carers who already receive the Scottish child payment when their children become eligible for them. Automatic payments are important. They mean less paperwork, less asking for help and less of the sense that you are holding out the begging bowl. The change will be introduced later this year when the child payment is extended to under-16s and increased to £25 per child per week.

The SNP Government might have one arm tied behind its back by the Tory Government in Westminster, but it is nevertheless winning a tug-of-war. Benefit cuts and bedroom taxes might threaten to make life harder for Scottish families, but we are fortunate in having a Scottish Government that shields, ameliorates and mitigates the worst of the Tory attacks on the poor. More than £1.4 billion has been used to mitigate some of the UK Tory Government's welfare benefit cuts; that is just part of the cost of the union to Scotland. The positive steps that the Scottish Government has taken—I have highlighted them and some are listed in the motion—are a pointer to the fairer and better Scotland that we could build with full access to our own resources and the proper powers of a normal nation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the closing speeches. I note that Kaukab Stewart is not present in the chamber and I expect an explanation for that.

16:30

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. Child poverty and the on-going cost of living crisis go against everything that Scottish Labour stands for. Our young people cannot reach their full potential unless they are supported properly during their early and school years to get the education, care and skills that they need to thrive.

It was a great pleasure that so much of the debate was listened to by a school party that joined us. I hope that the young people took from the debate the consensus across the Parliament

that we need to fight poverty in Scotland, including child poverty. We need to make this the best place for a young person to grow up in.

I welcome Shirley-Anne Somerville's opening speech and I am grateful for her comments about data, because one of the challenges is sharing data between local authorities, Social Security Scotland, the Scottish Government and others. If we want the highest take-up of benefits and other resources that are available to our families, we need to find a way through the maze that is the general data protection regulation. That applies to data sharing not just across Scotland but between the Scottish Government and the Westminster Government. I hope that the cabinet secretary will reaffirm the commitment to finding a way through that. If we are to do better for our families, we will see the greatest benefits in taking these small steps.

Many members have spoken about free school meals. It is interesting that the most recent cumulative statistics on the availability of free school meals date from 2019 and were published in 2020, when 38 per cent of pupils in Scotland were entitled to free school meals, but only 78.1 per cent of those pupils took them up. That means that more than 20 per cent of the young people who were entitled to free school meals could not take them up.

I welcome the move away from using free school meals as an assessment of financial stability, but I am extremely concerned that moving away from having a relatively simple statistic to collect means that we will lose sight of families. Some people are in hidden poverty, which they cannot escape from. For such individuals, much of the potential that has been talked about this afternoon could go amiss, which would be tragic.

I turn to other statements that have been made. As I have found myself doing before, I say an enormous thank you to Elena Whitham for sharing her experience of growing up and for articulating what it felt like to grow up in a house that perhaps differed from those of her friends. I found it powerful to hear her say that children are aware of children who are in poverty and that children take the decisions that they feel they ought to about what to share or not share with their parents.

Many contributions about personal experiences have been made this afternoon. The moment when a young person chooses not to share something with their family because of their perception of where their family is in comparison with others is a truly tragic flag of a situation that exists in Scotland. Across the chamber, we must agree to try to end such stigma.

Such stigma will be ended in many ways. It is not as simple as just improving the school situation. As Ross Greer rightly said, schools are not the answer to poverty. The answer lies in myriad other decisions that are taken in places other than schools. I hope that Ross Greer would agree that, similarly, schools cannot be held responsible for our poverty targets, three out of four of which it looks like we are going to miss. More broadly, responsibility rests on members in the chamber and on the Government.

I thank Ross Greer again for allowing my intervention regarding specialist sports gear. I raise that issue not because of my brilliant athletic attributes at school but because of the challenges that I have heard about in speaking, where I grew up, to children who want to play rugby. There are challenges around buying specialist boots, helmets to wear in scrums and the other protection that is required. Again, I look to the minister to say, in summing up, whether that will be part of the consideration in the future.

The debate has been interesting and fascinating, but I would like to have heard members talk about the need for young people to have a voice in it. One point that has been absent from all the speeches is the importance of listening to, liaising with and talking to our young people about their experiences. It is perhaps very hard for them, at their stage of life, to articulate those experiences but, nevertheless, we can ask high school pupils what it was like to be in primary school when they had to wear a different band if they had free school meals or their order was taken differently, or what it was like for those who could not make their P7 residential trip because their family could not afford it.

What has been consistent throughout the debate is a desire among members on all sides of the chamber for an education system that will facilitate our young people to have a better adult life and break—as members have described it—the cycle of poverty. Our young people should expect exactly what every other young person expects and wants, whether they have the desire to be a professional footballer, a astronaut, a nurse, a doctor or whatever else they want to be when they are asked about it in their P1 classes on “What can you do?” If they want to meet a policeman or want to be a policeman, or possibly even a teacher, they should be empowered to do that, because those are the dreams that they have, and nothing in Scotland should take those dreams away from them. Every child, irrespective of the school that they go to or the community that they come from, should demand from this Government and from members in the chamber that they have the right—their right—to see through their dream.

A lot of positive things have been said this afternoon, but I turn to the Government and say, "We have heard so much—please, please ensure that you deliver on that and set out the measurements so that we can say that success is being achieved." Let us not simply look back next year, when three out of our four poverty targets have not been reached.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I ask you to close now, Mr Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: There is cross-party agreement on this issue, and the Government will have it, provided that it can show that success is on the way.

16:37

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

The cost of a school day per child can, for low-income families, be a tough financial burden to bear. As we have heard throughout the contributions today, the situation has only been exacerbated by the pandemic and the rising cost of living. MSPs need to utilise the powers that we have in this Parliament to introduce policies to help and support those who need it most.

If we look at the Scottish Government's performance in relation to education standards throughout Scotland, we can see that it has not fulfilled its promise to parents and young people to make education its number 1 priority. The SNP has had 15 years in office to make a difference, but it has failed to make meaningful improvements to the life chances of our young people.

As we all know, a good education and positive destinations for our young people are paramount in tackling poverty. However, disadvantaged children continue to have lower attainment than their peers. The SNP has never fully got to grips with tackling the attainment gap, and it is our young people who continue to suffer, as Pam Gosal and other members highlighted.

Taking numeracy and literacy results as an example, we can see that the gaps in 2020-21 were larger than at any point since comparable data was made available in 2016-17. That shows that standards are slipping, and the Scottish Government must explain why that situation has got worse on its watch.

Bob Doris: The member mentioned positive destinations. A couple of weeks ago, data came out that showed that there are record levels of positive destinations, in particular from schools that serve the most deprived areas. Can she find it in her heart to say something about that, and the success of Scottish education?

Meghan Gallacher: We are making improvements, but we are not making them quickly enough. That is the problem that we face just now, and what the Scottish Government must get to grips with.

Initially, the Scottish Government set out funding for North Lanarkshire Council and eight other challenge authorities, which Michael Marra mentioned in his contribution, to specifically target those areas in improving attainment and reducing poverty levels. However, that has been scrapped and all local authorities will now have to share the funding. Regrettably, that takes funding away from areas such as North Lanarkshire and shows that the Scottish Government does not have a clear plan to tackle the attainment gap in areas of real need. When combined with the cut to the revised attainment gap funding, that will not help to improve outcomes for our young people or reduce the cost of the school day.

We have heard some interesting contributions this afternoon. During her contribution, the cabinet secretary mentioned the 1,140 hours early learning and childcare programme, which is unanimously supported throughout the Parliament. However, when she was asked about the unfair funding formula that has been created by the Government, which is causing nurseries in the PVI sector to close or reduce their hours, once again, not much of a response was given. The issue needs to be sorted urgently, and I again urge the Scottish Government to take action and review the funding formula for the PVI sector and local authorities to ensure that the 1,140 programme is fair for all.

Oliver Mundell mentioned the desperate state of our schools, and how they struggle to function and provide basic stationery for the classroom. He also mentioned the reduction in teacher numbers, which has undoubtedly impacted our most vulnerable young people.

Michael Marra spoke about the pressures that are faced by the childcare sector, and the SNP's failed laptop roll-out. Thirty per cent of laptops have been distributed, which is nowhere near good enough, and many of our young people are still without that vital tool to assist them with their schoolwork. That issue was also raised by my colleague Stephen Kerr, who reiterated how important education is in helping our young people to have the best start in life.

Pam Duncan-Glancy and others raised the important role that local authorities play in reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. As other councillors in the chamber have mentioned this afternoon, I am also nearly in my final week of being a councillor. It has been an honour and a privilege to

serve my local community over the past five years. Like other councillors, I have tried my best to make improvements in the ward area that I represent.

During my time as a councillor, one of the biggest frustrations that I have experienced is the lack of funding that councils receive from the Scottish Government to tackle the cost of the school day for low-income families. At one stage during this year's budget process, councils had to navigate a real-terms reduction in funding of roughly £264 million. At that time, council leaders branded it "barely survivable", with many councils having to make cuts in their education budgets to balance the books.

In my view, local authorities are best placed to implement policies that benefit the unique needs of an area. For example, Forgewood in Motherwell has completely different social and economic challenges from Giffnock in Eastwood. However, the SNP's obsession with centralisation has led to councils being stripped of their ability to make good local policies that benefit the people who live in that local authority area. The Scottish Government should empower our councils to reduce the cost of the school day for low-income families, but as a result of budgets being cut year on year, many services that assist with the cost of the school day have been reduced or scrapped altogether.

Clare Haughey: Does the member recognise the impact of a decade of damaging austerity cuts, Brexit price rises and economic mismanagement on children and families across Scotland? Will she join me in calling on the UK Government to scrap the national insurance tax hike, reverse its cuts to universal credit and raise pensions and benefits—which are reserved matters—rather than impose real-terms cuts?

Meghan Gallacher: I condemn the Scottish Government lavishing millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on funding yet another referendum instead of using that money to invest in our schools and other council services, which is what we are debating today.

Breakfast clubs are important for many young people, and it is not only politicians in the chamber who share that view. A recent poll shows that almost all teachers who were surveyed believe that breakfast is important for pupils, and research shows that having breakfast improves school performance. Not having that service for parents, or increasing the cost of school meals, contributes to the financial pressures that many parents face.

The Scottish Government must fund councils properly so that they can provide breakfast clubs, as well as take forward other innovative ideas that

help to reduce the cost of the school day for low-income families.

Before I conclude my remarks, I will raise a concern that relates to the Government's consultation to remove school uniforms for secondary school pupils and the unintended consequences that that could have on families and their expenses.

Uniforms are an integral and sensible part of school life. They give pupils a sense of dignity, foster discipline and, most important, they promote equality throughout the school setting. If we had to remove uniforms from our schools, parents who are struggling financially might not be able to dress their children in expensive fashionable or designer clothing. I am concerned that that could lead to bullying or young people being made to feel inferior to their peers. SNP members have raised that as a concern, saying that dress-down days can be difficult for families to afford. Ross Greer and others commented on specific items being required for school uniforms. They are right to say that that issue needs to be looked at.

Although I understand that, after undertaking the largest survey of school uniforms in the UK, the Schoolwear Association has found that the average cost of compulsory uniform and sportswear items is about £101.19 per pupil. However, the cost of an average fashionable or designer outfit would be significantly higher than that.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: Sorry—I am about to conclude.

We have clothing grants available for families who need additional support. However, as I mentioned earlier, if councils were funded properly, they could make the choice to increase the clothing grant to assist with the cost of the school day for low-income families.

It is disappointing that the SNP has turned up today to give itself a pat on the back for some of the measures that it has introduced without taking any responsibility for the significant improvements that it must still make in reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families.

16:46

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government aims to build an education system that ensures equal access to the full package of education, breaking down financial barriers to make a real difference to the lives of children. I was particularly struck by those from all parties who spoke about children's experiences of poverty while in school and the decisions that they take in

an attempt to protect their families from some of the costs of the school day. We should all be cognisant of those. I am also particularly cognisant of Martin Whitfield's point about the importance of listening to children's experiences and to their voices. I reassure him that that is very much the Government's intention on this issue and on all education policies.

We have had discussion of the Scottish education system in general by all parties, so I will highlight some key facts before making my closing remarks. Before the pandemic, we saw a year-on-year positive trend in CFE levels—we were seeing progress. In 2021, we had the most higher passes since the advent of devolution. As Bob Doris pointed out, we also recently recorded a record high number of positive destinations for our young people. We have a lot to be proud of in our education system, although we know that there is much more to do. In the context of poverty, it is important that we recognise that.

We made improvements through our first tackling child poverty delivery plan, but we know that there is more to do. That plan estimated that almost £2.18 billion of funding has directly benefited children. That is a great investment by the Government, but, as I said, we know that there is much more that we can do.

We have increased the value of eight Scottish social security benefits by 6 per cent, which is a great more than has happened with Westminster-reserved benefits. In addition, we have doubled the game-changing Scottish child payment to £20 per week per child, and we will increase it to £25 and extend the payment to children under 16 by the end of the year. That is five times as much as the £5 payment that we were being asked to introduce less than five years ago.

As Bob Doris pointed out, as a result of that increase, by the end of 2022, our package of five benefits for low-income families will be worth £10,000 by the time that a family's first child turns six. That is a difference of more than £8,200 for every eligible child born in Scotland compared with other places in the UK, which highlights the unparalleled support that this Government is providing.

In his opening remarks, Oliver Mundell, when challenged by my colleague on the impact of the UK Government, said that he is not denying that there are challenges. When discussing poverty, we cannot get away from the impact that the UK Government has, and Evelyn Tweed's remarks showed what that impact is on families right across Scotland.

We are seeing developments within the Scottish attainment challenge funding to support our schools and, in particular, our headteachers. In

March, I launched the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge programme with up to £200 million-worth of funding for the year ahead as part of our £1 billion investment over this session of Parliament. Recognising that poverty exists in every community, a portion of the £200 million will be extended to all local authorities in Scotland. That approach was developed and was agreed to by COSLA because it is very important that we recognise that poverty exists everywhere.

I think that Oliver Mundell is about to intervene. I hope that it is to tell me where we should cut the money from if he does not agree with the changes that COSLA and the Scottish Government made.

Oliver Mundell: We heard in the debate about the significant waste that we have seen from the Government and the money that has been spent on constitutional obsessions. How can the cabinet secretary say that cutting support for some of our poorest communities is the right thing to do? We heard from our back benchers that some of the Scottish Government's initiatives are a foretaste of what we would get in an independent Scotland. Is that one of them?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Once again, Oliver Mundell does not actually deal with the challenge that Governments have in delivering a fair funding settlement to 32 local authorities. It is unfortunate that the Scottish Conservatives still wish to see that money being taken away from the local authorities that we have just given money to.

Also in his opening remarks, Oliver Mundell attacked curriculum for excellence. A "knowledge-based mindset" is apparently what we need. Perhaps Mr Mundell should expand his reading list and look at what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has said about the need to shift away from the traditional knowledge-versus-skills focus by acknowledging the importance of both in learning. It is important that we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and skills.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take another intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Given the length of the previous intervention, I will not.

Michael Marra asked about the financial sustainability of early learning and childcare. We have, of course, produced figures for the financial sustainability health check, and we are committed to publishing data on local authority ELC funding rates annually. He also challenged the Government to act rather than just talk, so I will remind him of what has already been delivered by the Government very recently. Core curriculum charges have been removed; there has been an increase to universalism in the provision of free school meals in primaries 4 and 5; music tuition

fees have been removed; school clothing grants have been increased; there are 2,000 more teachers than there were pre-pandemic; 1,140 free childcare hours have been delivered; there is support for free school meals during the school holidays; and there is free bus travel for under-22s. I could go on.

Stephen Kerr: The cabinet secretary has not mentioned free devices, so let me ask about those and free internet connections, because they go together. How many of the current secondary school population in Scotland will leave school without getting the advantage of a free device and a free internet connection? By her own admission, many young people in Scotland's schools will never see the delivery of that SNP so-called election promise.

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I can give you that time back.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Mr Kerr will be fully cognisant of the fact that the manifesto pledge was for the delivery of the devices and the connectivity by the end of the parliamentary session, and that is exactly what the Government is determined to provide.

Kaukab Stewart mentioned the important work that was done by CPAG on the cost of the school day, some of which was funded by the Scottish Government through the Scottish attainment challenge funding. That work gave very practical advice to schools right across the country and I commend CPAG for it.

Ross Greer and others talked about the importance of the school uniform guidance, which I will be very pleased to work with Mr Greer on during our time working in partnership.

I am not sure where the Scottish Conservatives are getting the idea from, but I want to make it clear that we are not taking school uniforms away from any school. Decisions on school uniforms are for individual schools; all that is being provided is guidance.

I take the point that Martin Whitfield made on PE equipment. I was not one of those people who excelled in that area of expertise at school, but that does not mean that I will not support those who do.

Many members spoke about the importance of universalism in the provision of free school meals. We have a policy of providing free school meals to children in primaries 1 to 5, and they now benefit from balanced and nutritious free school lunches during school term time. We are also committed to rolling out free school lunches to all children in primary and special schools in this parliamentary

session, which aligns with our commitment on free school milk.

Many members talked about the impact that curriculum costs can have on individual families and, sometimes, even on individual children making decisions about subject choices. The Scottish Government has moved on that issue to provide support to local government to ensure that there are no core curriculum costs for primary and secondary pupils. We do not want families to be asked to meet the costs of resources and materials for practical lessons, and I believe that the removal of charges from families will support participation in core curriculum activities.

That ties in with the action that the Government has already taken on music tuition. We are determined to do more on that, working with our colleagues in COSLA, to ensure that there is a funding package in place to support the development of music tuition and improve people's experience of music at school.

We heard once again about the importance of the school clothing grant and the important role that the Scottish Government has already played through its action on that.

Stephen Kerr alluded to the provision of digital devices, and I reiterate that our commitment is to ensure that every child has access to a device and internet connection by the end of this parliamentary session. We provided £25 million in 2020-21, in response to the pandemic, to deliver devices for more than 72,000 disadvantaged children, and we provided 14,000 connectivity packages to help young people to get online. A further £45 million was made available early in 2021 to support remote learning. That was used flexibly by councils to provide extra staff or to deliver even more devices or connectivity packages, if that was required.

It is important to recognise the work that many councils have done in that area, which has meant that almost 280,000 devices have been or are in the process of being distributed to learners. That figure includes the devices that have been provided by the Scottish Government.

Across Government, we have taken a great deal of action on the cost of the school day, as the motion sets out, but we know that there is more to do. In partnership with our colleagues in the Scottish Green Party, we are determined to tackle that challenge head on.

As we look at the cost of the school day and the challenges that we have within that, we must recognise the context that we are in and the poverty that exists in Scotland. We are determined to tackle poverty across Government as part of our challenge to improve the life chances of young people right across the country. There was

progress in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap before the pandemic, and we must now pick up the pace. That is why the Government has committed £1 billion in attainment funding and will fund 3,500 additional teachers on top of those who were recruited during the pandemic, and it is why we have taken the action that I detailed earlier in my speech on tackling the cost of the school day.

It would be remiss of me to finish my speech without wishing good luck to all the pupils in Scotland who, from today, are starting their exams. On behalf of members, if I may, I wish everybody who is taking part in the exam diet this year the very best of success.

British Sign Language Bill

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-04115, which is a legislative consent motion on the British Sign Language Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I invite Clare Haughey to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the British Sign Language Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 16 June 2021, relating to the encouragement of the use of British Sign Language, so far as they fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—
[Clare Haughey]

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

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-04172, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a change to this week's business. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request to speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 28 April 2022—

after

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs and Islands

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Census 2022

and after

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Financial Resolution: Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill—
[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

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-04138.2, in the name of Oliver Mundell, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04138, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-04138.2, in the name of Oliver Mundell, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (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)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (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)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (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)
 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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 48, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-04138.1, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04138, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-04138, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reducing the cost of the school day for low-income families, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The Presiding Officer: I call Angus Robertson for a point of order.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): [Inaudible.]

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. [Inaudible.]—I typed R in the chat function but no one has come back to me. I have a terrible connection.

The Presiding Officer: Ms Mochan, how do you wish to vote?

I apologise to Carol Mochan and Angus Robertson; we are obviously having an issue with connection, at the moment.

For

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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 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, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (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)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 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)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 80, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the actions being taken to support children and young people in low-income families to access school education; notes that Scottish Government commitments include expansion of free school meals, provision of free school milk, removal of core curriculum charges, ensuring low-income families do not face costs for curriculum-related trips, abolition of fees for instrumental music tuition, increasing the school clothing grant, producing guidance to reduce school uniform costs, provision of a digital device and connectivity to every pupil, and services to support income maximisation, and recognises that this complements the wide range of policy initiatives set out in the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland, to maximise household resources and improve children's wellbeing and life chances; believes that accessible childcare is critical to poverty reduction to ensure access to education and the labour market, that this must be full wrap-around, affordable provision with qualified staff, and centred on the needs of the child; recognises that extracurricular and after-school activities are key to the mental health of young people, as well as ensuring children have a wide range of skills, but that this must be affordable and accessible to all children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds; calls for the Scottish Government to ensure the universal availability of summer clubs with activities, learning and free school meals, and further calls for the publication of up-to-date baseline data on child poverty, as well as a post-COVID-19 pandemic assessment of the health of the early years sector.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-04115, in the name of Clare Haughey, on the British Sign Language Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the British Sign Language Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 16 June 2021, relating to the encouragement of the use of British Sign Language, so far as they fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

MS Awareness Week 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-03062, in the name of David Torrance, on MS awareness week 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes MS Awareness Week, taking place from 25 April to 1 May 2022; understands that Scotland has one of the highest rates per head of population of multiple sclerosis (MS) in the world, with more than 15,000 people living with the condition; notes that MS can cause a range of often fluctuating physical and mental symptoms, which impact the way people move and feel; understands that MS affects everyone with the condition differently; welcomes the work of charities, such as the MS Society and the MS Trust, in raising awareness of MS; believes that their work to fund research is of critical importance to stop MS; understands that there are now 17 treatments available for MS in NHS Scotland, when, 20 years ago, there were none, and notes the calls on MSPs across the Parliament to help raise awareness to stop MS.

17:13

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank my colleagues for giving their support to the motion and for speaking in the debate. I recognise the contribution of my colleague George Adam in hosting this debate over many years. I can guarantee that there will be no mention of Paisley in my speech tonight. [Laughter.]

This year, MS awareness week runs from 25 April to 1 May, providing an opportunity to shine a light on an often invisible and misunderstood condition that affects more than 900 people in Fife and 15,000 across Scotland. Multiple sclerosis is a long-lasting disease that can affect the brain, spinal cord and optic nerve. It can cause problems with vision, balance, muscle control and other basic bodily functions.

Not every MS patient is affected by the condition in the same way. In reality, symptoms experienced by an individual can fluctuate from day to day. The fact is that effects are very often different for everyone who has the condition. Some people experience mild symptoms that do not require treatment while others will have trouble getting around and doing simple daily tasks. For some, symptoms can worsen with time and living with MS can affect many aspects of daily life including health, wellness, relationships and careers. A diagnosis of MS means that people might have to adapt to a new lifestyle, which brings us to the theme of this year's awareness week: uncertainty.

Uncertainty is one of the hardest parts of any progressive and unpredictable disease. Even

though the symptoms might be manageable, not knowing what the future holds makes it impossible to plan work and social activities. Everyone who is affected by the condition struggles with the unpredictability of MS, but it is clear that some people find it particularly hard to accept. MS can be difficult to deal with and the circumstances that surround a diagnosis can make people feel many different emotions, often putting great strain on their relationships with friends, family and loved ones. Some studies have shown that the rate of divorce is high in families where one partner is suffering from MS, with a change in dynamics from partner or lover to carer often taking its toll on relationships. The unpredictability of when MS symptoms will strike can lead to a strain on any relationship because of developing dependency on a healthy partner.

A chronic illness such as MS can also have a profound effect on education and employment. Missed deadlines, absences, disruptions and failure to complete studies can result in students having to manage their expectations of what they are able to achieve and setting their bars lower to accommodate their illness and associated limitations. For those in employment there are often some barriers that no level of support can negate.

In Fife, those barriers have been recognised and addressed by the Fife branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. It has set up a scholarship with Fife College to support people with MS while they study or retrain. One important aspect of the scholarship that sets it apart from many avenues of financial support is that it can be used for anything that helps people with MS to cope with living with the uncertainty of the condition. For example, if they wake up one morning too tired to take the bus to college, they will be able to afford a taxi.

Such progressive initiatives are vital and are just one reason why support groups are so important, because MS, its severity, and the course of the disease varies considerably from person to person. The value of talking to and connecting with people who truly understand and are facing similar experiences and challenges is priceless. The emotional and social support offered through such groups can be a life saver. For many people, it might be their only means of socialising. For others, it could provide an opportunity to discuss with their peers subjects that they simply would not discuss with anyone else, even a general practitioner. For example, sexual dysfunction can be common in people with MS but many lack the confidence to broach the subject with healthcare providers, preferring instead to discuss the subject with peers who they trust and feel more comfortable with. I do not believe that that is a reflection on our health or social care professions

but rather a recognition that different conditions and environments help people to open up and express their concerns.

It is not just medical or social uncertainty that makes life with MS difficult. Financial uncertainties almost go hand in hand with the condition. The replacement of the personal independence payment in Scotland with the adult disability payment has been welcomed by many people I have spoken with, with particular praise given to a commitment by the Scottish Government to treating people with dignity, fairness and respect while ensuring a very different delivery of disability benefit.

Many important and significant lessons have been learned from the PIP model, which caused anxiety and untold stress in many claimants for many years. Only a few days ago, I listened in horror as a lady who is living with MS told me of her experience of those assessments. She described the process as cruel, tiring and ineffective, particularly for anyone with a neurological condition such as MS. She recalled the final assessment that she attended, where she witnessed a gentleman leaving the centre in a highly emotional state, then simply sitting in his car sobbing.

I welcome the Scottish Government's approach that will see the scrapping of a functional assessment, the removal of routine face-to-face assessments, recognition given to people's individual needs and understanding that fluctuating conditions must be taken into account, and a choice of how to apply offered. For people with MS, navigating the mentally draining transition from who you were to who you now are is traumatic enough without the additional ordeal of an uncaring benefit system. For many it will be their first time on benefits, because they have been forced out of employment by a body that can no longer do the things it used to do.

I sit on the Scottish Parliament's Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, and I am pleased to have contributed to on-going work on the petition lodged by Keith Park on behalf of the MS Society. It calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to remove the 20m rule from the proposed adult disability payment eligibility criteria, or to identify an alternative form of support for people with mobility needs. The petition notes that, under the rule, people who can walk one step over 20m do not qualify for the right level of mobility support, which leads to people with MS losing their independence and leaves some feeling trapped in their homes. The committee has considered numerous submissions and engaged with a number of organisations, including MS Scotland and the Scottish Government. It is clearly an issue that is felt

deeply by many people living with MS and other neurological conditions.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to facilitating an independent review of adult disability payment in 2023, one year after delivery has begun, which it believes will enable all the eligible criteria to be considered.

In conclusion, as one very astute lady recently told me, if we see a person with MS, they are having a good day, because when they are having a bad day we just will not see them at all. I extend many thanks to everyone who has joined us in the gallery today. Collectively, we all have a duty to better understand the negative effects of fatigue, cognitive impairment, emotional burden and decreased physical function on the personal and professional lives of people living with MS and the responsibility to help with those burdens in whatever way we can, not just during awareness week but all year round. [Applause.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Torrance. I gently remind members of the public who are joining us in the gallery—and it is great to see you all there—that we are not allowed to clap from the gallery. Thank you.

17:21

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I congratulate David Torrance MSP on securing this important members' business debate and I pay tribute to the MS Society Scotland for everything that it does in supporting those with MS and its work to raise awareness.

MS is unpredictable and different for everyone, which is why the theme of this year's MS awareness week is uncertainty. MS is a chronic condition that affects the brain and spinal cord. With MS, the coating that protects the nerves, myelin, is damaged, which causes a range of symptoms and problems with how a person moves, thinks and feels. In MS, the immune system, which normally helps to fight off infections, mistakes myelin for a foreign body and attacks it. That damages the myelin and snips off the nerve fibres, either slightly or completely, leaving scars known as lesions or plaques, which leads to damage and disrupts messages that travel along nerve fibres, causing them to slow down, become distorted or not get through at all.

As well as losing myelin, sometimes there can be damage to the actual nerve fibres too. It is this nerve damage that causes the increase in disability that occurs over time. One of my constituents recently described MS to me as this:

"If you imagine your brain is a big mass of intricate wires that operate the whole body, MS causes the protective sheath around each wire to deteriorate so the wires do not function properly, but because the brain is amazing, it tries

to still find a way to send the signals in other ways, sometimes crossing the wires. That is why folk with MS often battle with fatigue because just walking and talking can seem like trying to juggle while treading through a snowdrift or like trying to do complex calculus while reciting the alphabet backwards."

It is hard to pinpoint the exact symptoms of MS as it can be different for everyone affected. However, the central nervous system links everything the body does, so multiple sclerosis can cause many different types of symptoms. The specific symptoms that appear depend on which part of the central nervous system has been affected and the job of the damaged nerve. Some of the most common symptoms of multiple sclerosis include eye problems, numbness, a tingling feeling sometimes described to be a bit like pins and needles, fatigue and pain.

MS symptoms can also come and go and change over time. They can be mild or more severe. The symptoms of MS are caused by the immune system attacking the nerves in the brain or spinal cord by mistake and those nerves control a lot of different parts of the body. That is why MS symptoms can affect many parts of the body and why everyone's MS is different.

Scotland has one of the highest rates of MS in the world. Around 15,750 people are living with MS in Scotland. The new figure means that, according to MS Society Scotland, one in 300 people in Scotland are living with a potentially disabling condition that damages the body's nerves and makes it harder for people to do things such as walking, talking, eating and thinking. Initiatives by the Scottish Government have contributed to an environment that is conducive to research in MS. For example, the Scottish Government has made it compulsory that anyone diagnosed with MS is contacted by a specialist nurse within 10 days.

There is also the rate of people being diagnosed with MS and it is important to keep raising awareness about MS in Scotland, particularly given the high rates of the condition. Research has come on massively in recent years, and the more that people know, the better. It is paramount that we raise awareness to make sure that people know how MS can affect individuals and how varied it can be.

In conclusion, I put on the record my thanks to my constituents for sharing their experience and contributing to my real-life knowledge of the condition. I am honoured to be their voice in the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to help raise awareness.

17:26

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I begin by expressing my thanks to David

Torrance for securing time for this important debate. I also pay tribute to the MS Society Scotland for the support that it has provided for the debate, and for the work that it does as secretariat to the Scottish Parliament cross-party group on MS and in supporting people living with MS, of whom I know that there are many in the gallery tonight. David Torrance and I have the honour of being co-conveners of that CPG and I am pleased that it has begun the current session of Parliament with such energy and enthusiasm. I also cannot let this moment go by without mentioning the incredible shift that George Adam put in on behalf of the CPG over the years.

I spoke in the same debate in 2017, and much has changed in the past five years, with a variety of new treatments having been approved by the Scottish Medicines Consortium for active relapsing remitting MS and primary progressive MS. Last year, Scotland was the first country in the UK to approve the use of Zeposia, a drug that allows recipients to take it at home, thereby avoiding clinical appointments, which would have been particularly beneficial during the pandemic.

All those developments in the way in which MS is treated and managed have come about in recent years only because of the continued and sustained focus on MS at many levels. We try our best in Parliament to keep the pressure on, but the work of third sector organisations, health professionals across the national health service and, of course, the actions of the wider public deserve to be commended. It is a far cry from just over 20 years ago, before the Scottish Parliament existed, when there were no treatments available for MS in Scotland, as the motion notes.

David Torrance spoke movingly of the toll that MS can have on people in their everyday lives. There are massive human costs. I have personally witnessed the development of MS treatments from the perspective of my father, who has lived with the condition for 37 years. He was diagnosed in the mid-1980s, when knowledge of the condition and how it would impact his life in the long run was still relatively unknown. As ever, I pay tribute to him, his example and his courage. Fortunately, he has received impeccable care. New treatments have helped him and countless others to cope with MS and allowed them to live full and happy lives.

Indeed, it is welcome that, in 2022, 17 disease-modifying therapies are available to people living with MS. They help to minimise the severity and frequency of MS relapses, thus slowing the progression of the disease. However, as I know, and as is the theme of this year's campaign, MS is a condition wrought with uncertainty about what lies ahead, when it might flare up, how much worse it might become, and how best to care for someone with MS in those circumstances.

That uncertainty was, of course, amplified during the pandemic, particularly because of the vulnerability of those living with MS as a result of having a weakened immune system, and the inability to access vital services, including physiotherapy, mental health support and even sports classes. Even though we are two years into the pandemic and many services have evolved to allow people to access them remotely, including virtual appointments and counselling, we know that Covid remains active and many people remain understandably worried about it.

As the NHS begins to reopen and remobilise, it is more important than ever that people living with MS, and crucially those who show symptoms of MS, can access services swiftly. That is why it was concerning that the remobilisation of neurological services was not specifically addressed in the Scottish Government's "NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026". I hope that the minister will be able to touch on that point in her closing remarks.

I also want to touch on the importance of high-quality palliative care in supporting people with MS. The progress that has been made in recent years to improve the treatment options for people living with MS has been remarkable and everyone in the MS community who has campaigned for it and made it happen should be congratulated, but much more needs to be done to improve access to specialist care and support and to remove some of the uncertainties that presently exist.

17:30

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I, too, thank David Torrance for securing this debate. I also thank the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on MS, many of whom are in the gallery, and we have the group's co-conveners here with us this evening. I want particularly to pay tribute to the person who has done most to raise awareness in the Parliament, and I do not mean my esteemed colleague George Adam; I mean, of course, George's wife, Stacey, who is also in the gallery this evening. I want to thank her just for being oor Stacey.

This is not the first MS debate in which I have spoken in the Parliament. In fact, I think that I might have spoken in every one, and they have been a feature since I was elected in 2011. George Adam started the tradition of holding the debate, and it is important that David Torrance is now continuing it. I am always struck by the personal stories of my colleagues on these evenings, because they let me know just how many of us are personally touched by this condition. That is no surprise, really, because we know that Scotland has the highest rate of MS in the world, with more than 15,000 people living with the condition.

For that reason, I want to share my story this evening. I am no exception. I want to say a little bit about my big sister, who is my inspiration and has always been my hero. Irene is 10 years older than me and is an MS sufferer. She is a retired GP and still examines on behalf of the Royal College of General Practitioners, which is a vital cog in ensuring that we have primary care doctors in the UK. She resides in England and, although she no longer drives, she has in her possession—as she has had since she was driving—a blue badge. She calls it “my precious”—apologies to the chamber, to Tolkien and to Andy Serkis, but it is her precious. Why is it so important to her? It is because it gives her independence. It gives her the ability to continue to go about her daily life, to be economically and socially independent and to continue to work and take a full part in society. Quite frankly, it has given her certainty in an uncertain life.

I know that my sister has been lucky, because I have been frustrated at the number of representations that I have made, often unsuccessfully, on behalf of MS sufferers who were rejected for blue badges because of the arbitrary criteria that do not recognise the fluctuating symptoms from relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis. I thank David Torrance for talking about the potential changes to benefits that may be made in Scotland. A blue badge can be a lifeline to an MS sufferer as it allows them to continue to work and to play a full part in society and gives them the confidence that they can go out in the knowledge that, if they have a relapse or they feel unwell, they can get back home safely and easily. That is extremely important.

I want to make a plea for us to work on doing something to improve the understanding of MS among those who decide what support is available to sufferers. That is why I again thank David Torrance and the MS charities that have supported today’s debate for their work in raising awareness and trying to ensure that everybody understands what a difficult condition this is and how important it is that MS sufferers get all the support that they need to allow them to have the best life possible.

17:34

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by saying a huge thank you to the MS Society for organising the debate—I see members of the society here this evening—and for all that they and other organisations do to advocate for people living with MS. Of course, I also thank my colleague David Torrance for securing tonight’s debate.

Throughout the pandemic and in the face of the rising cost of living, service closures and systemic

poverty and inequality faced by their members, the MS organisations have given their all to stand up for their members, relentlessly fought for the realisation of their rights and made sure that their voices were heard. They did so against a backdrop of uncertainty, which is the theme of this year’s MS week. They were uncertain of their own funding, meaning extra pressure on staff and an inability to properly plan for the long term, uncertain of what was coming and uncertain of the twists and turns that they would have to navigate.

As a disabled person, I know how it feels to live a life of uncertainty, yet certainty is the one thing that we really need to ensure that we enjoy our human rights equally to everyone else. We need practical assistance as well as information, space and time. Without those things and certainty about them, even on a good day people are left without dignity, freedom, control and choice. In fact, when asked by the MS Society as part of its survey entitled “My MS My Needs”, 67 per cent of those responding said that they were scared and uncertain about the future.

There are too many elements of disabled people’s lives and of their human rights that remain uncertain. Social care remains piecemeal. Many who need it are still living without the basic care that they need. People cannot get the adaptations that they need and are dying on waiting lists, spending their last years in houses that are not suitable for them. Transport is inaccessible and using even the transport that is accessible needs more planning than is the case for non-disabled people. If someone wants to get on a train, they have to call for assistance; if they want to get on a bus, they need to hope that there is not another wheelchair user already on board; and if they want to ride on the Glasgow subway—well, tough. Last year, NASA announced that it is looking to put disabled people on the moon, yet, in Glasgow, many disabled people cannot get from one side of the city to another.

On average, people with MS have additional living costs of between £600 and £1,000 a month. Disabled people are unsure whether they can make ends meet. That is why we need a properly functioning social security system that ensures that people have the money they need. The Government should move quickly to address the adequacy of and eligibility for disability benefits in Scotland and to assess the additional costs of being a disabled person, and it should then uprate the disability benefits to match that. It must recognise that people’s conditions, including MS, can fluctuate—there can be good and bad days.

That is why the Scottish Labour Party stood alongside the MS Society to fight for the removal of the unfair 20m rule. Despite asking multiple times in committee, in the chamber and in letters

to the cabinet secretary for a commitment to do that, we are as yet to get that assurance. That causes yet more uncertainty, and I urge the Government to provide certainty on that soon. People should not be worried that they will miss out on money that they need. They should not be punished for having good days. We should celebrate people's good days and be there for them on the bad.

Social security is just one way in which we can bring more certainty to people's lives but it is not the only way. We could restart care and respite services and ensure that unpaid carers get the breaks that they need, giving people the certainty that they need around their care. We could pay care workers £15 an hour to show them that their work is valued, make sure that they stay in the profession and attract new people to it, providing certainty that there will be carers to give the support that we need. Further, we could provide care free at the point of delivery, making sure that people have the certainty that they need that they will not have to sell their homes or spend their life savings just to afford the care that they cannot live without.

This debate is about uncertainty and, as we have heard, there is far too much of that. I want to finish by saying that, among the uncertainty, one thing is always certain: disabled people, people with MS and their organisations will never give up. They are resilient. However, they should not have to be, because Scotland should just be better for all us. Nevertheless they, and so we, must persist in the fight for equality.

17:38

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I join others in congratulating David Torrance for stepping into the Dr Martens shoes of George Adam—and stepping into one of his suits, by the looks of things. Genuinely, I thank David Torrance for making this debate possible, and I thank the MS Society, not just for the support that it has provided with briefings for the debate but for its year-round work in supporting the MS community, which Donald Cameron mentioned.

I have long taken an interest in the issue, not through personal experience but because the constituency that I represent has the highest level of MS not just in Scotland but anywhere in the world. As a result, Orkney is a community that has long been supportive of those with and affected by MS. That was evidenced in recent months by the Orkney District Association of Young Farmers Clubs, whose bale art competition had a focus on MS this year, and the remarkable tractor run that was organised by Graham Nicholson and Steven Sinclair, which raised a phenomenal amount of

money for MS as well as a couple of other local charities.

Beyond that, we have an MS therapy centre that is greatly valued by the MS community. We are fortunate in having an MS nurse in the wonderful Moira Flett, who was mentioned in previous debates that focused on the work that MS nurses do. I think that, generally speaking, although there is a great deal more to do, we feel broadly fortunate in Orkney in terms of the support that is available.

One of the previous MS debates that I took part in focused on research, which is mentioned in David Torrance's motion today. Although I think that Donald Cameron was right to talk about the progress that has been made in recent years in the approval of treatments, there is a long way still to go. However, I think that we can draw confidence from the fact that, here in Scotland in particular, we are seeing world-leading research being taken forward by our universities and research institutes, including by individuals such as Professor Jim Wilson at the University of Edinburgh, who is an Orcadian. I think that that gives us hope for the future.

David Torrance is right to draw on the individual nature of this condition—it not only differs between individuals but on a day-to-day basis for each individual. The theme of "My MS My Life" was reflected in previous debates, and I remember attending a reception that coincided with an earlier debate and talking to my constituent Alan Jamieson who talked about the importance of providing opportunities for those affected by MS to gather, to share experience and to feel companionship. I think that, as a result of the pandemic, that has been far more difficult, and the risk of isolation has been felt acutely by those in the MS community.

I know that, in Orkney, a popular watercolour class that was run previously moved into the online arena. The classes were held via Zoom and the participants have produced cards and a book of watercolours that are accompanied by prose that has been produced by primary 6 and 7 pupils from Hope primary school. That evidences what can be done, and it is such a relief that we are now seeing some of those opportunities for activities being re-established and starting up again in practice. They are important and, in that line, I am looking forward to the reappearance of Scottish Ballet at the end of this week as it takes forward workshops in Orkney, hopefully presaging a point at which local dance practitioners, musicians and volunteers can help to provide those sorts of classes, in recognition of the importance of physical movement and mobility to the physical and mental health of those with MS.

On an optimistic note, I see that the briefing from the MS Society quotes one individual saying:

"My attitude is that nobody has got certainty, so just live your life to the fullest because you don't know what is around the corner."

I think that that is an important message to convey. It reflects very much the attitude of my constituent Hayley Budge, who has announced that she is just about to embark on a flying scholarship, demonstrating that, as ever, she continues to take life by the horns.

I thank David Torrance again for allowing the Parliament to have this annual debate, and I look forward to further debates in future and more progress in the years to come.

17:43

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I, too, thank David Torrance for securing this members' business debate. The theme of MS awareness week this year is uncertainty, and uncertainty has been with us more than ever in the past few years, with Covid, the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis.

As we all know, MS can be very uncertain for everyone living with it. People with the condition have good and bad days, and there is uncertainty over when, if and how symptoms might change, how their condition might progress and whether their treatments will continue to work.

In 2019, the "My MS My Needs" survey revealed that only 40 per cent of people with the condition felt confident that they would be able to overcome the challenges that their MS might bring in the future. In the most recent survey, which was carried out ahead of MS awareness week, 67 per cent of respondents living with MS said they were scared and uncertain about the future.

As has been said, Scotland has one of highest rates of MS anywhere in the world. Over 15,000 people are living with MS in Scotland. Most of them are diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS, whereby their symptoms suddenly get worse due to relapses and then gradually improve. However, over time, many people who are diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS will develop secondary progressive MS. They will stop getting relapses but their disability will steadily get worse.

Just 20 years ago, there were no treatments available to halt the progression of MS—as, I think, Donald Cameron mentioned. However, thanks to the work of researchers and the MS community mobilising to fund them, there are now 17 disease-modifying therapies approved in Scotland to treat MS. These treatments can help to minimise the severity and frequency of MS

relapses, thus slowing the progression of the disease.

The uncertainty can be exacerbated by a social security system that does not guarantee adequate support, stretched health services and a rising cost of living that will have a greater impact on disabled people than on others. Across Scotland, local MS groups work tirelessly for their community. Where they are supported and properly resourced, expert specialist MS nurses and neurologists make an incredible difference to the lives of people who are living with MS. Leuchie House, in my constituency, offers respite to MS sufferers and those with other long-term conditions, and it was previously an MS Society-run facility. Leuchie House is now an independent charity but it still offers services to those with MS.

The pandemic has been a very stressful and uncertain time for the MS community. Not only were people with MS more vulnerable to Covid, due to their immune systems being weakened by their treatment, but services that they relied on were closed. In response to that, at the height of the lockdown in 2020, the MS Society co-designed a wellbeing hub to address the community's needs and to fill service gaps, particularly in community-led services. The hub, which was funded by the Scottish Government's neurological framework fund, is person centred and works in partnership with MS professionals. It delivers online services—something that has been mentioned—to enable support to be provided to a much wider audience, including those with poor mobility or other commitments. The hub builds incrementally on innovation, adapting and improving as it gathers information from the participants, and, to date, over 1,100 live-streamed sessions have been delivered to about 750 participants.

Before the pandemic, the MS Society estimated that the average person living with MS faces additional costs of between £600 and £1,000 per month, depending on the severity of their condition. This lunch time, at the good food nation event that some of us attended, I spoke to somebody who raised that point. They do not have MS, but they have a disability and, of course, that issue is really concerning for them. I hope that the minister will pick up on that point and the point that Pam Duncan-Glancy made.

The constant uncertainty for those living with MS means that they are never certain whether their condition will progress and further stretch already limited resources. In a survey that was carried out by the MS Society, only 20 per cent of people living with MS said that the Government paid for all their care needs to be met. They said that it funded, on average, about 75 per cent of their non-medical costs, including the costs of self-management activities and therapies. Those

figures are taken from surveys that were carried out before the pandemic and before the rise in the cost of living. We can therefore surmise that the scale of the issues outlined will only have grown.

As parliamentarians, we must ensure that the financial support that can be accessed matches the significant rises in the cost of living and that those living with MS receive the financial support that they need.

17:47

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank David Torrance for securing the debate.

Multiple sclerosis is a lifelong disease that is estimated to affect 2.8 million people across the globe and more than 15,000 people in Scotland. The experience of living with MS is not always limited to having MS, as additional complications can come with the disease. They can be wide ranging and include bladder and bowel issues, paralysis and alterations to people's mental state, including symptoms such as forgetfulness, depression and even epilepsy.

The theme of this year's MS awareness week is uncertainty. I asked a very dear friend of mine if she would mind writing something about her experience of MS. She is a wonderful woman who will support anyone who needs it and never complains about how she is feeling. This is absolutely reflected in her thoughts, which I am pleased to be able to share in her words today. She says:

"Indeed, the biggest issue with MS is the uncertainty of everything. It usually takes years to get a proper diagnosis due to the fact that you would normally experience symptoms over time, which, on their own would never point to MS. Its only when you start experiencing several symptoms together that you tend to get an MRI scan. Sometimes, that can be inconclusive but in my case, the scarring was easily visible."

When you are first told that you have MS, it's quite a devastating blow because there are no doctors or neurologists who can give you a roadmap of what you will experience. Every single person will experience something different and quite often have different symptoms at the onset. It's difficult to come to terms with the fact that you have no guarantee on how quickly it may progress.

When I was first diagnosed, I was told that I had remitting/relapsing MS. In my mind, it was a case of seeing how long I was going to get between episodes. Each time, you relapse, it's

1. the uncertainty of how long it will last
2. as each week goes by, you know that there is less chance of regaining all the functionality that you had before the episode
3. In the earlier episodes, I was able to see an improvement after a few weeks & then as the years went on, the symptoms of the relapse would linger for months.

It got to the stage where, after a relapse, I never had any improvement & I have now been diagnosed with secondary progressive MS.

I feel incredibly lucky because I am still able to walk and can manage to still look after myself but I find it difficult to plan things due to the uncertainty of the disease. I can feel reasonable one day & the next, I am in so much pain that I am unable to do anything. My sister had MS & she ended up in a wheelchair very quickly, so that's another reason to feel lucky."

I put on record again my thanks to my friend for giving me her comments.

Just two decades ago, there were no treatments available for those who had MS. However, thanks to all those involved in the MS community, the NHS, charities and dedicated researchers, 17 disease-modifying therapies have now been approved in Scotland to treat MS at various stages. Those range from treatments that address the severity and frequency of MS relapses in those who are living with relapsing-remitting MS to—more recently—treatments that have now been green-lit to address secondary progressive MS, which we have heard about tonight.

Even before the pandemic, the MS Society estimated that those living with MS faced costs of an additional £600 to £1,000 per month to access essential goods and services. For example, additional electricity is required to power assistive technologies and higher heating bills result from the need to stay warm. Those who are living with an underlying and persistent health condition such as MS face living costs amounting to, on average, the equivalent of half their income.

I thank the MS Society Scotland for its incredible work in supporting those who live with MS, for its work to fund research and for representing the MS community across the political sphere and wider society. As parliamentarians, we must tackle these very prevalent challenges, especially the cost of living crisis and the impact of the Covid pandemic, and ensure that MS sufferers are provided with the support they need to have the best quality of life.

17:52

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank David Torrance for bringing this important debate to the chamber today, and I thank the MS charities for the work that they do.

Uncertainty is the theme for this year's MS awareness week. Uncertainty often brings with it a sense of powerlessness, and that is what I would like us to consider when we try to find the means to support the lives of those living with multiple sclerosis. The northern isles have a high prevalence of MS, with uncertainty still as to why that is the case. For example, why do some families have multiple members with MS? Why do places like New Zealand and Canada have high

rates of MS, too? They are both countries with descendants of Orcadians and Shetlanders who emigrated there decades ago. As my MSP colleague Liam McArthur has pointed out, Orkney has the highest incidence of MS anywhere in the world. Professor Jim Wilson, who is from Orkney himself, has, with his team at the University of Edinburgh, been carrying out world-leading work on the subject over many years.

Research continues into why there is a great prevalence and into finding new treatments and therapies, but we all look forward to the day when we can say we have found a way to stop MS. I note the 17 treatments that are available for MS in NHS Scotland, which are referenced in the motion. In 2019, a procedure that reboots an MS patient's system, halting the progress of MS, was hailed as a huge step forward and recommended for use on the NHS in Scotland. Some people have received this treatment abroad, and those who have undergone the treatment have said that it has halted the progress of MS and restored some of what MS has affected.

Treatment abroad, however, means costs. As the MS Society briefing states, those living with MS already spend between £600 and £1,000 per month on additional costs. That could be for energy bills, goods, services or trying to stay warm. MS is unpredictable and there is much uncertainty as to how someone living with MS may feel at any given time. Perhaps it is feeling too warm at the height of winter, when other family members need the heating on, and only an electric fan can relieve the MS symptoms. It may be for only 10 minutes, but that racks up the electricity costs. Having a shower can require more towels, and using more towels creates more washing, which uses more electricity.

The MS Society briefing shows that only 20 per cent of people living with MS have all their care needs met by the Government. There are also costs that cannot be managed, such as the emotional pressure, the additional asks of partners and the impact on family life. Getting help from the Government, such as through PIP, often requires a walking test, and these tests do not measure the long-term, changeable, fluctuating nature of MS. Walking any distance can feel much easier one day than the next. Furthermore, appeals and bureaucracy contribute to the uncertainty and sense of powerlessness. The effort to overturn something you know to be unjust can be exhausting. A system has developed whereby people are forced through hoops of admin to survive; so, with the uncertainty of MS comes a sense of powerlessness.

We must address both of those issues and ensure that those living with MS and those around them feel supported to ride the waves of

uncertainty, feel empowered to speak out and have confidence that they will be heard.

17:55

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am very pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Government this afternoon as we mark MS awareness week. I thank David Torrance for his important motion.

As my colleagues have highlighted, Scotland has one of the highest incidences of MS and, as an MSP with a Highland constituency, I am particularly aware that the incidence is greatest in our most northerly areas. I assure members that I am committed to ensuring that all people living in Scotland with MS are able to access the very best possible care and support.

Late last year, I met the MS Society to discuss the findings of its "Neurology now" report and how we can work together to drive up standards of care across the country. It is clear that working in partnership will help us to focus on what matters most to people with MS

Although 20 years ago there were no treatments available for MS, we now have 17 in Scotland. That progress is thanks in no small part to the amazing work of researchers and MS charities. Today I want to pay tribute to their committed efforts to find more and better treatments for this devastating condition and to support those who are affected by it.

Liam McArthur: The minister is right to point to the developments that there have been in treatments, but sitting alongside that has to be a recognition of the importance that MS nurses have played and continue to play. I know that I referenced Moira Flett in my own speech, but there is a fragility to the position and I think that the MS community would wish to see a reassurance about succession planning and to know that there is a pipeline of MS nurses to fill the gaps that will inevitably appear in the years ahead.

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree and I am keen to work with MS charities and people with a special interest in this and with the neurology team in the Scottish Government to ensure that there is resilience. We have seen in certain geographical areas in Scotland recently that there is an issue with these particular and specialised roles being dependent on maybe just one individual. When that one individual is not available, it can devastate the service that is being delivered. I am desperately keen to make sure that we have resilient and sustainable services throughout Scotland. I am not unaware of the issues in the far north, where we have the highest incidence but

also a sparse population and challenging times delivering public services. I am keen to work closely with everyone who has an interest in making sure that we provide a sustainable service going forward.

Despite the disruption to health and social care services during the pandemic, we have sustained our efforts to deliver the commitments of our neurological care and support framework. That framework is designed to ensure that everyone with a neurological condition, including MS, can access the care and support that they need to live well on their own terms. Despite the pressure on Scottish Government priorities, the focus and funding for the framework has been maintained. This year, we are continuing to implement this as a priority, with £1 million commissioned for work to improve neurological care across Scotland.

Over the past 18 months we have invested more than £300,000 in projects specifically to improve the health and wellbeing of people with MS in Scotland. To pick up on the point of my colleague Mr Cameron, although the NHS recovery plan is not condition specific, the aim is to effect whole-system recovery and support prioritisation and planning. In that respect, we would expect it to directly affect neurological services and the experiences and outcomes for people with neurological conditions such as MS.

I am delighted that, through the neurological framework, we have been able to fund three new projects to deliver mental, physical and social support to people who are affected by MS, and test models of preventative, rehabilitative and palliative care. That includes the MS Society's wellbeing hub, which has helped more than 750 people with vital one-to-one support such as counselling and physiotherapy, as well as providing group and social activities.

We understand the invaluable care and support that is delivered by Scotland's MS nurses. I recognise and commend their commitment to maintaining high levels of patient support during the pandemic. The Scottish MS register's 2020-21 report noted that, despite the challenges presented by Covid, 87 per cent of newly diagnosed people received contact with an MS specialist nurse within 10 working days of diagnosis and more than 99 per cent of people were contacted within 10 working days of an MS nurse receiving the referral. It is astounding to be able to maintain that level of service when we are facing so many challenges on so many fronts.

Colleagues have spoken today about the additional financial challenges facing people with disabilities as they experience the impacts of the rising cost of living. The Scottish Government is taking a range of actions to help people facing the combined pressures of higher energy bills, the

increased cost of their weekly shop, the UK Government's national insurance hike and interest rate rises. I can assure you that we are doing all that we can within our powers to help those who are worst affected, including those people with serious health conditions. For example, we are stepping up our investment to accelerate deployment of heat and energy efficiency measures and to support those who are least able to pay, allocating at least £1.8 billion over this session of Parliament. We have recently allocated a further £10 million to our fuel and security fund.

Another example of the action that we are taking to help with financial pressures is making social security support for people with MS more straightforward to access. We have replaced the adversarial approach of the Department for Work and Pensions by removing assessments and degrading examinations. Through the introduction of the adult disability payment, we are providing new, simplified and compassionate systems that will treat people with dignity and respect.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What is the minister's view on the 20m rule?

Maree Todd: We are undertaking an independent review of that. As it currently operates, we are applying different eligibility criteria to ensure that the 20m rule is applied fairly. The changes will mean that Social Security Scotland will make more accurate and consistent decisions on mobility, resulting in a more dignified experience for folk with MS. We are undertaking an independent review of that and are more than happy to keep the member informed of progress on that front.

As many have said, continuing research is critical to better understanding and improving the treatment of MS and I pay tribute to the medical research community working in this area. The outcomes of new research and trials can be groundbreaking. I am delighted that we have awarded around £1.9 million through the Scottish Government's chief scientist office to support a major four-year research project led by NHS Lothian and the University of Edinburgh. The aim is to develop a new approach to guide the treatment of MS and help people have better control of their condition. In addition, we have awarded £360,000 in recent years to fund five PhD research studentships on MS at Scottish universities as part of a programme to increase research on neurodegenerative conditions.

I want to close this debate by thanking those who have shared their stories, experiences and contributions today. I also want to recognise the dedication of those impacted by MS, the professionals involved in their care and the MS research community, who are all working with us to make a difference. Of course, I want to

commend the tireless commitment of Scotland's MS charities in improving the quality of life of those they support.

The on-going progress on MS further speaks to the value of cross party working, and I very much look forward to attending the joint MS and epilepsy cross-party group meeting in June to explore further the next steps that we can take together.

Looking to the future, I can assure the chamber that, as a Government, we will continue to work with partners across health, social care, welfare and housing to enact transformational change and improve the quality of life and outcomes for people with neurological conditions such as MS.

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

Meeting closed at 18:05.

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