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Thursday 2 February 2023

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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

Maternity Services (Caithness)

1. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will conduct an independent review into the maternity model in Caithness. (S6O-01860)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The maternity model in Caithness was put in place by NHS Highland following a review that was led by Professor Hugo van Woerden, who was then NHS Highland's director of public health, following the tragic death of a full-term baby at the unit in 2015. The report of the review, which included two external reviews, recommended that the maternity unit in Caithness move to a midwife-led unit to address safety issues. That change was unanimously agreed by NHS Highland's board.

The model of care that operates in Caithness is, of course, similar to models that operate in other parts of NHS Highland and, indeed, other NHS boards in Scotland.

Rhoda Grant will be aware of the work that is under way in the best start north review, which was commissioned jointly by NHS Grampian, NHS Highland and the three island health boards. The work of the review group was paused during Covid, but it recently restarted, led by the directors of midwifery from all six northern boards.

Rhoda Grant: The cabinet secretary has carried out independent reviews of Moray maternity services, and he has now commenced a review in Dumfries and Galloway. The review that was carried out by NHS Highland was not independent of NHS Highland, and concerns about maternity services have been on-going since the change was made back in 2016, when obstetric cover was removed. Women have to travel over 100 miles to give birth. That is like asking a woman from Edinburgh to travel to Newcastle to give birth. It is absolutely unacceptable.

Will the cabinet secretary stop the centralisation of maternity services away from Caithness, admit that that was a mistake and commit to having a full, independent review as soon as possible?

Humza Yousaf: I regret the tone and implication of Ms Grant's question. As I stated in

my original answer, it is important for us to remember that the review was carried out after the tragic death of a full-term baby at the unit in 2015. Those were the circumstances behind why there was a review. Two external reviews were included as part of the overall review. On the basis and the back of that tragic death, the review recommended that Caithness move to a midwife-led unit to address the safety issues.

Ms Grant was wrong to say that I have commissioned an independent review in relation to maternity services in Wigtownshire. The local health board decided to commence an independent review of maternity services in Wigtownshire on 18 January. That is a decision for the health board. The health board in Highland is, of course, part of the best start north review, which will look at how maternity services operate throughout Highland. I hope that Rhoda Grant will collaborate with and take part in that review—she undoubtedly will.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Scottish Government has reviewed the conclusions of the risk assessments for each maternity patient in labour who has been transferred from Caithness general hospital to Raigmore hospital? If it has not done so, will it?

Humza Yousaf: Again, those are important decisions and important risk assessments for local health boards to take. Of course I understand the concerns that are legitimately raised by Edward Mountain and Rhoda Grant.

I met the Caithness Health Action Team—or CHAT—campaign group last year. As a result of that, I know that there are now face-to-face formal meetings between NHS Highland and the campaign group.

NHS Highland has in place protocols to mitigate the risks associated with the transfer of pregnant women, particularly in an emergency situation. The best start north review has commenced, and I encourage Edward Mountain, as I encouraged Rhoda Grant, to engage with that review.

Menopause Specialist Network

2. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the development of a menopause specialist network. (S6O-01861)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): The action in the women's health plan to develop a national menopause specialist network has been completed. The network has been meeting since 2021 to provide consistent advice and peer support and to share good practice among healthcare professionals, including primary care

teams. The network meets on a quarterly basis and includes representatives from all mainland national health service boards.

Gillian Martin: I thank the minister for that answer. It was recently estimated that, in the United Kingdom, during an undefined period, more than 900,000 employees left their jobs because of the impact of menopause symptoms. In addition to better clinical support for women during menopause, better understanding and support is needed in workplaces. I know that I am potentially creeping into another minister's remit but, in the spirit of cross-portfolio working, could some work be done within the women's health brief to better inform workplaces on the menopause and get meaningful policies in place? Perhaps that could start with our NHS—after all, it employs many women whom we cannot afford to lose from the workplace.

Maree Todd: Our women's health plan highlights the need to consider women as rounded individuals with a range of needs, and we are committed to working across portfolios to achieve our aim of reducing health inequalities and improving health outcomes for women, including in the workplace. Menopausal women are the fastest growing demographic in the workforce, so it is now more important than ever to speak openly about the menopause at work. Through the women's health plan, we are developing support for employers and those who experience symptoms of the menopause. That work includes a menopause and menstrual health workplace policy for NHS Scotland as an example of best practice to promote across the public, private and third sectors.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Last week, the Scottish Government published its women's health progress report, which was delayed by six months. Can the minister explain why the establishment of a dedicated menopause policy post has not been achieved? In the Government's implementation plan, that was classed as a short-term action, so it should have been delivered within the year. When will an appointment be made?

Maree Todd: I am very proud of the progress that we have made in the first year of the women's health plan and, of course, Scotland was the first country in the United Kingdom to put forward a women's health plan. From the moment that I took up my post, I have been very clear that we have a great deal of work to do to overturn the millennia of discrimination and disadvantage that women face. I think that we have done great work on the menopause. As I said in my previous answer, we have brought forward access to a specialist menopause workforce. On our NHS Inform website, we have busted myths about the

menopause, and I am really proud of the progress that we have made.

I am happy to write to Jackie Baillie with an update in response to the specific question that she asked.

Speech Difficulties (Support for Young People)

3. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support young people with speech difficulties. (S6O-01862)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): We want to intervene early to prevent speech difficulties from arising in young people. An important part of our efforts to address that has been increasing our health visitor workforce by more than 500 since 2014 and expanding funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours for all eligible children. Both measures are critical to supporting children's early language development.

We also recognise the importance of timely access to speech and language therapy. We have increased health boards' flexibility in reducing waiting times, to ensure that those with the greatest need are seen first, while maximising prevention and early intervention approaches for those who are waiting.

Jamie Greene: The cabinet secretary talks about early intervention, but the reality is that there is a two-year waiting list in North Ayrshire to see a children's speech therapist. In fact, the list is now closed, and parents have to go private and pay for assistance for their children. There is a two-tier system in speech therapy in Scotland, due to chronic underfunding and a nationwide lack of speech therapists. I am sure that members across the chamber will be experiencing similar issues. How have we let things get so bad? Early intervention is absolutely key to young people's learning and development, but if there is a two-year waiting list, the outcomes will be much poorer. Will the cabinet secretary reflect on that? What is he going to do about it?

Humza Yousaf: I will not only reflect on it, but make sure that we take action. Jamie Greene is right to raise the issue of NHS Ayrshire and Arran. I know about the specific challenges that NHS Ayrshire and Arran has had with recruitment and that it has lost some staff in its speech and language therapy department.

I have asked the chief allied health professions officer to engage directly with the board. She has asked NHS Ayrshire and Arran to resume the waiting list for routine referrals, which I know was an issue of concern. I understand NHS Ayrshire and Arran's decision to close the list for routine referrals, and it is important to say that that

decision never affected urgent referrals, which are still being seen. The average referral-to-assessment time is four days.

I do not agree with Jamie Greene's suggestion that the national health service has been chronically underfunded—that is incorrect. We are putting record investment into our NHS, with a record £19 billion for 2023-24.

Ferries Task Force (Orkney)

4. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of the ferries task force with Orkney Islands Council. (S6O-01863)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The transport minister and I had a useful meeting with representatives of Orkney Islands Council earlier this week. We discussed a range of matters about how best to support the Council with the challenges that it faces in delivering its ferry responsibilities, and we look forward to continuing discussions.

Liam McArthur: I welcome the meeting on Tuesday and, given how late in the day the meeting was arranged, I welcome the fact that a further meeting is due to take place in, I think, April.

It is important—vital, I would say—that ministers remain involved in the process. Given the impact on island communities in Orkney of increased disruption to services due to the age of the internal ferry fleet, not to mention the costs and the impact through higher emissions, what reassurance can the Deputy First Minister offer my constituents that this process will ultimately lead to a funding package that will allow the replacement of that fleet?

John Swinney: I think the fact that the work is under way should be reassurance to Mr McArthur's constituents. I recognise the significance of the issues that are involved and the necessity of there being reliable interisland ferries and connections for his constituents. We have embarked on the work that is necessary to explore those issues, and we look forward to sustaining that work with Orkney Islands Council.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased that that meeting finally took place and that the talks were, at least in the Scottish Government's finest ministerial technospeak, positive and constructive. However, I am not aware of any agenda having been published ahead of the meeting. Will the cabinet secretary ensure full transparency of the discussions so that residents in Orkney can have confidence that this is not just another talking shop or, as one local councillor put it, a "placating

tactic"? When will full, detailed minutes of the meeting be publicly available, and when will the agenda for the next talks be published?

John Swinney: It is nice to see that Mr Halcro Johnston is able to summon up a really warm welcome for the Government's dialogue with Orkney Islands Council. *[Interruption.]* It really is another further descent into the miserableism of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. There is an abundance of miserableism on the Scottish Conservative benches on a constant basis.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): If you would answer the question briefly, please.

John Swinney: As with all things—*[Interruption.]* As with all things, there will be full transparency from the Scottish Government—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members! We will hear the cabinet secretary. We have a finite amount of time and a lot of interest, and I would be grateful if we could get through business.

John Swinney: There is a finite time for having to put up with the nonsense that we get from the Scottish Conservatives. I simply reiterate that the Government will apply full transparency to all the deliberations that we have with Orkney Islands Council.

Commissions and Commissioners (Costs)

5. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether any increased number and cost of commissions and commissioners for which it is responsible will mean resources being diverted away from front-line services. (S6O-01864)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The financial resources that are sought by such office-holders to support their respective functions are provided for in relevant acts, which are a matter for the Parliament. It is a simple matter of fact that the more office-holders there are, and the more resources they utilise, the less will be available for public services.

I have been open with Parliament about the scale of the pressures that we currently face in the public finances, and it is vital that all public bodies and office-holders contain their costs.

John Mason: It has been suggested that we might be heading towards having 14 commissioners. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that could mean that sectors with a commissioner might have a louder voice and that sectors without a commissioner will not be heard so well?

John Swinney: This is a difficult issue for the Government to judge upon, because the legislation to establish commissioners is essentially a matter for Parliament. Parliament also, through the work of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, has to regulate, or advise on the regulation of, the financial assistance that is made available to office-holders. That is a difficult issue for the Government to control, because doing so would potentially mean the Government intruding on the right and proper space that is available for Parliament to determine these issues. I am acutely conscious of the necessity to respect that boundary.

Having said that, all of us—whether we are members of the Government or of the Opposition—have a duty to recognise the pressures that exist on the public finances. That should be reflected in the financial support that is available to office-holders and the number of office-holders that we have in place.

Town Centre Action Plan (Impact in Mid Scotland and Fife)

6. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what impact its town centre action plan is having in communities in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-01865)

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): In Mid Scotland and Fife, the Scottish Government is delivering on town centre action by providing more than £22 million in funding to local authorities for local projects since 2019 through our place-based investment programme and the town centre fund. A further £4.5 million is being invested through the regeneration capital grant fund over the period 2020-23 alone.

We are also supporting community wealth-building pilots in Fife, and we are working collaboratively with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in the Fife area on climate action.

Roz McCall: I appreciate the response from the minister, but I think that he is missing the point. I have asked this question in three different ways—twice in writing and again today. I keep getting told that we have a plan, and another plan—but the plans are not working. [*Interruption.*]

11:56

Meeting suspended.

11:58

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We may recommence. Minister Tom Arthur will complete his response to Ms McCall.

Tom Arthur: Presiding Officer, I had completed my response.

The Presiding Officer: Sorry—excuse me. Ms McCall.

Roz McCall: Thank you. I do appreciate the response from the minister, but I think that he misses the point. I have asked this question in three different ways—twice in writing and again today. I keep getting told that we have a plan, and another plan—but the plans are not working.

Shop vacancy rates remain unchanged, with one in six stores in our high streets lying empty. That is the highest rate in the United Kingdom. The volume of empty units in shopping centres remains at more than 20 per cent, which is completely unchanged. Calls from industry bodies to match the 75 per cent rates relief for small businesses that is in place in the rest of the United Kingdom are being ignored. Given that, what tangible evidence does the minister have that those multiple plans will make any impact whatsoever on the communities in Mid Scotland and Fife?

Tom Arthur: This is a complex area. Our town centres face systemic challenges going back many years. They have also faced the acute crisis of the pandemic and the current cost crisis.

There are three aspects to how we address that. There is clear strategic direction, which we are providing; there is partnership working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local communities; and there is funding, which I outlined in my original answer. There is no short-term fix and no overnight solution to the challenges that our town centres face.

The issue is not unique to Scotland, but we have a strategic approach, through our town centre action plan, through our retail strategy and through our community wealth building aspirations. Indeed, I launched the consultation on community wealth building earlier this week. In Mid Scotland and Fife, Clackmannanshire and Fife, there are pilot areas that are supported by the Scottish Government.

As I said, this is a complex area. We are providing funding and we are working in partnership. If the member, or indeed any member, wishes to discuss these complex issues in more detail, I am more than happy to meet them to do so.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Gender Self-identification (Rapists)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

The public have rightly been outraged that a double rapist changed their gender after being charged by the police. This week, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, Keith Brown, was asked whether that rapist should now be considered a woman. This is what Keith Brown said:

"I think that is the case. We have to accept people identify, as in this case, as women."

Does the First Minister agree with her justice secretary?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I think that a rapist should be considered a rapist. That is what I think. That individual has been convicted of rapes and therefore that is the terminology. I will not get into the individual circumstances of that particular individual's claims to be a woman, because I do not have enough information about that, but the individual has been convicted of serious sex offences, and that is the relevant consideration in terms of which prison they should be accommodated in.

I will say briefly that, in addition to that, these issues have obviously had great public and media attention in recent days, but these issues are not new, nor have the arrangements within the Scottish Prison Service for dealing with transgender prisoners changed in any way. As the chair of the Prison Officers Association Scotland said this week, the Scottish Prison Service has been making risk-based decisions about the accommodation of trans prisoners for many years, and indeed it has been doing that effectively and safely.

The risk assessment processes in the cases that have been reported in recent days are under way. It is not the case that any decision had been taken to allow either of those people to serve their sentences in women's prisons. However, given the nature of the coverage and the potential—the reality—for that to cause concern among women prisoners and the general population, and indeed to cause distress in the trans community, the overwhelming majority of whom, like the overwhelming majority of the general population, have never committed any offences, led us to clarify the matter and put it beyond doubt.

The position now, pending the review that was already under way, is that no transgender prisoner with a history of violence, including sexual violence, against women will be housed in or

transferred to a women's prison. That is what is important, and it is that clarity that matters to the public.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister's final words there were about clarity. That answer was anything but clear. Her justice secretary is very clear that he thinks that a double rapist is a woman. He has enough information to come to that conclusion. The First Minister says that she does not have enough information to come to that conclusion.

I want to look at an area where we agree, which is that trans people are not the problem here. However, here is where we disagree. When a man rapes two women, we do not think that he should be considered a woman just because he says so. We should call out criminals such as that one, who are abusing the system—they are not trans people, but dangerous and violent men. Adam Graham, who wants to be known as Isla Bryson, raped two women. He is an abusive man who seeks to exploit loopholes in the Government's current policy.

Nicola Sturgeon's answer to me was that she wants to call a rapist a rapist. However, can she just give a clear answer to my question—not the question that she wants to answer, but the one that I want to ask her: is that double rapist a woman?

The First Minister: That individual claims to be a woman; I said that I do not have information about whether those claims have validity. I do not think that Douglas Ross and I are disagreeing here. What is relevant in this case is not whether the individual is a man or claims to be a woman or is trans; what is relevant is that the individual is a rapist. That is how the individual should be described and that is what should be the main consideration in deciding how the individual is dealt with—that is why the individual is in a male prison and not a female one. Those are the issues that matter.

Douglas Ross talked about current policy. I accept that he has not done so today, but I have read many things in recent days that have tried to conflate the situation in prisons with the legislation that Parliament passed overwhelmingly before Christmas. The two are, of course, not connected and would not be connected even if that legislation was in force, which it is not. The current policy, which is, in my understanding, broadly similar to the approaches that are taken in other jurisdictions, has been in place in the Scottish Prison Service since 2014. As the chair of the Prison Officers Association Scotland said himself this week, the prison service has been taking risk-based decisions about transgender prisoners for many years and it has been doing that safely and effectively. That is what it should continue to do,

albeit with the presumptions that were set out for clarity at the weekend.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister is right to say that I have not mentioned the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill at all. I am speaking about the current Scottish Government policy—I have it here—which states that

“it is the view of the Scottish Government that trans women are women”.

It is the view of the First Minister’s justice secretary that a double rapist is a woman. I am not sure what the First Minister’s view on that is. She says that there is no disagreement between her and me on that point, but there is a massive disagreement. I believe that a double rapist or anyone who rapes a woman is a man—they cannot be considered anything else.

This all matters for very good reasons. It matters because when a violent criminal, such as Adam Graham, gets out of prison, under Nicola Sturgeon’s current Government policies—the ones that I have just spoken about, which she raised—he is considered a woman, which means that sex offenders such as him can keep forcing their way into women’s spaces.

Adam Graham was already able to access a beauty class after raping two women. Twenty-one-year-old Rachel Ferguson was in that class with him and told a newspaper:

“It really scares me to look back and realise she was watching me with no clothes on after being charged with this. It makes me feel physically sick and violated.”

This is a fundamental question about women’s safety. I refuse to trust the word of a rapist. Why does the First Minister do so?

The First Minister: I do not, and nothing that I have said suggests that I do.

Can I set out the reality here? In rightly dealing with the matter and in my answering questions about that very serious individual case, it is important that we also remember—and it bears repetition—that trans women are a very tiny proportion of our society and that the overwhelming number of them never commit any offences of any description, as is true for the overwhelming majority of the general population. In dealing with individuals such as that one, who have to be dealt with very seriously, it is important that we do not inadvertently undermine the rights of the law-abiding majority of trans people in our country. That is an important principle of which we must not lose sight.

Rapists should be dealt with as rapists—I do not think that there is any disagreement on that, and it does a disservice to the victims of crime to suggest that we disagree on that issue.

On access to single-sex spaces, it is the case that, under current law—the Equality Act 2010, which is of course legislation that is reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament—there are provisions to exclude trans women from single-sex spaces. Those exemptions can be applied whether or not a trans woman has a gender recognition certificate. It is important that, as we discuss these important issues, we do so calmly—I recognise that we are having a calm exchange right now—and without misrepresenting the position, even inadvertently, because that would do a disservice to the trans community more generally, the victims of male violence against women and the population at large.

I will remind Douglas Ross of another point, which I have made before. I do not pretend to speak for them, but organisations such as Rape Crisis Scotland and Scottish Women’s Aid, which deal day and daily with women who have been the victims of male violence against them, were supportive of the legislation, and they deal with the situation around trans women every day. We could all do with listening more to them, because they are in many respects the experts in their field.

Douglas Ross: We are having a calm debate, which is right for this sensitive issue. However, I am feeling frustrated, as I was last week, that I have repeatedly asked the First Minister for an answer that she refuses to give.

Under law, a rapist has to be a man. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans thinks that this rapist is a woman. In my final opportunity today, I would like to get a clear answer from the First Minister. Is Adam Graham—this double rapist—a man or a woman?

Let us remember that, in court, this man lied. He told people that he did not rape two women. However, under Nicola Sturgeon’s policy, he is believed when he claims to be a woman. He can keep on demanding access to women’s spaces, he can keep forcing victims to call him “she” and he can keep terrifying and traumatising women.

There is murmuring among SNP members, so I ask them and the First Minister to listen to the words of one of Adam Graham’s victims. This survivor was raped by him. On Sunday, she said:

“I don’t believe a word ... I don’t believe he’s truly transgender. I feel as if he’s made a mockery out of them using it ... I’m sure he’s faking it.”

This brave woman summed up the feeling of the majority of people in Scotland when she said:

“You’ve got genuine cases where people are desperate to get reassignment for the right reasons because they’ve been born into that body ... not because they’ve raped two people and decided that’s an easy way out.”

Why is the First Minister giving rapists an easy way out?

The First Minister: That does a disservice to victims of crime. I will say a number of things, which are all extremely important.

On the quote that Douglas Ross narrated, my feeling is that that is almost certainly the case, which is why the key factor—and only important factor—in the case is not the individual's claim to be a woman but the fact that they have been convicted of rape. The individual is a rapist: that should be the deciding factor in decisions about how that prisoner is treated, which, indeed, is what is happening in relation to where the prisoner is.

On more than one occasion today, Douglas Ross has used the terminology of forcing access to women-only spaces. Those are important considerations, but that language ignores the exemptions under current equality law, which is law that, even if this Parliament wanted to, it could not change. Those exemptions enable trans women to be excluded from single-sex spaces when the tests in that legislation are met, regardless of whether they have a gender recognition certificate.

The other thing that Douglas Ross's questions ignore is the fact that, for any sex offenders who are released from prison, there are monitoring arrangements—the well-established MAPPA or multi-agency public protection arrangements—to ensure that any continuing risks that are posed by individuals, regardless of gender, are properly managed.

It is really important that we look seriously at all these issues, but, in doing so, we should bear in mind two things. First, as I have said, we should not further stigmatise trans people generally. That is important. Secondly, we should not cause undue concern among the public. If there are issues to be addressed, we should address them, but we should do that in a way that is not just calm, but which does not misrepresent the situation, because that is in nobody's interest.

If all of us come at such debates in that spirit, we can work our way through all these issues, respecting the rights of those whose rights deserve to be respected, but also protecting the public—and women, in particular—from men who want to and do commit violent acts against them.

Local Government Funding

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): For the past 15 years, the Scottish Government has short-changed local councils. It did not matter whether the Scottish Government's budget went up or down; local authorities had their budgets cut. Now, they are at financial breaking point.

This week, two of Scotland's most senior councillors said that council services face being

“either significantly reduced, cut, or stopped altogether”,

and that

“Local authorities will have to consider cutting pupil support staff, libraries, youth work and other vital services”.

Are those councillors wrong?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Councillors are not wrong to say that we live in times of real financial difficulty and constraint. That is true of the Scottish Government, and it is absolutely true of councils across our country.

At this time every year—I think that I made this comment a couple of weeks ago—we hear such questions, as councils look at options that are put before them. Often, those options are not taken forward. However, it is important that all councils look carefully at how they balance their budgets, but that they do that in a way that also fulfils their priorities.

In the budget for the financial year that is about to start—of course, Parliament will debate the Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill at stage 1 this afternoon—we are proposing an increase in the resources available to local government of more than £570 million. That is a real-terms increase of £160 million.

Times are difficult for local government, but within the constrained financial resources that we have, which will be increased by decisions that we are taking—we are proposing to Parliament that we ask those who earn the most to pay a bit more—we are treating local government as fairly as we can.

Finally, I make an invitation to Anas Sarwar and to any member across the chamber: if, as we go through the budget process, they have a proposition to give more money to local government, they should by all means make that suggestion, but they should also tell us where in the budget we should take that money from. That is the only grown-up and mature way to approach budget deliberations.

Anas Sarwar: Why are the councillors whom I quoted considering budget cuts? They are considering cuts because of decisions that the Scottish Government has made—there have been £6 billion of core budget cuts since 2013-14.

The words that I quoted were the words of Scottish National Party councillors Shona Morrison and Katie Hagmann, who are the president and the resources spokesperson of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Those two SNP councillors have been brave enough to say out loud what the SNP Government knows is the truth.

Councillor Hagmann also said:

“Councils are left with little choice other than to potentially raise council tax, raise our fees and charges, or

cut or potentially even stop our vital services that we are currently providing”.

When she was asked whether council tax might have to rise by as much as 10 per cent, she said:

“all options are very much on the table.”

The public are being asked to foot the bill for public services that are getting worse by the week because the Scottish Government has underfunded councils for 15 years. First Minister, why are people across Scotland being asked to pay more for less?

The First Minister: That is not the case.

I repeat the offer that I made to Anas Sarwar. As a Parliament, we will debate the budget for next year in this afternoon’s stage 1 debate on the Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill. The budget proposals will then go through the other stages before the budget is passed by Parliament as a whole.

We have put forward a balanced budget. We have allocated all the resources that we have at our disposal. Within that budget, we are increasing local government resources by more than £0.5 billion. If Anas Sarwar is saying that he thinks that local government should get more money than that, let him bring forward that proposal but also tell us—because there is no unallocated pot of cash—where we should take the extra money from. Should it be from the national health service? Should it be from the police? Should it be from the central Government education budget? Those are real questions.

If Anas Sarwar is standing here arguing for a bigger increase for local government—which is legitimate and which he has a right to do—and if he wants to be taken seriously, he must also say where that money should come from. I am waiting for, and am open to, any suggestion that Anas Sarwar wants to make.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister wants to ignore all this Government’s waste, the vanity projects and the money hidden behind the sofa for the deal with the Greens. We have had cuts right across the country, and she knows that she has taken the decisions that have slashed council budgets. For 15 years, the SNP has underfunded councils, even when her ministers had more money to spend—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: People across Scotland are now facing the double whammy of increased income taxes and hikes in council tax. That means that taxes will go up—not only for the richest but for almost every household in Scotland—but that services will still be cut.

Now, a leaked COSLA document reveals potential job losses on a massive scale. COSLA estimates that more than 7,000 jobs will be lost—7,000. Here is what council leaders from her own party say:

“This budget settlement will have a detrimental impact on vital local services. It will lead to the loss of jobs both within local authorities and within the local companies who supply goods and services to councils.”

After 15 years of command and control, things have got so bad that many of Nicola Sturgeon’s own colleagues are no longer willing to blindly follow orders. Her MPs have lost faith in her strategy, her councillors have lost faith in her decisions and now her MSPs face a choice. Will they vote through those cuts or will they finally—finally—stand up for their local communities?

The First Minister: The problem for Anas Sarwar is that it is the verdict of the Scottish people that matters, which is why I am standing here and he is sitting over there.

Anas Sarwar has just demonstrated that he does not yet deserve to be taken seriously in these exchanges. He is absolutely correct to say that these are really difficult times for local government, as they are for central Government, when it comes to the allocation of resources. We have put a draft budget before Parliament. I stress the word “draft”. Parliament is about to debate that budget.

All the resources that we have are allocated within that draft budget. If it is Anas Sarwar’s proposition that he would like more money to go to local government, that is a legitimate proposal to make, but he has to say where he wants us to take that money from, because it would have to come from the national health service, from the police or from other budgets. Anas Sarwar has that opportunity, and I will wait to hear whether a proposition comes from Labour this afternoon. If he wants us to increase the allocation to local government, he has to say that we should reduce the allocation to some other part of our budget. He must let us know where he thinks that money should come from, and then we can perhaps have a proper, grown-up discussion, rather than the one that he has just made us have.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** When we are told to run from danger, our emergency workers run towards it. Last week, Edinburgh firefighter Barry Martin did just that and paid the ultimate price for so doing. I hope that the First Minister will join me in paying tribute to Barry and will support our efforts to see him posthumously awarded the George cross, the highest award for civilian gallantry.

To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-01775)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Cabinet will meet on Tuesday.

I also take the opportunity to convey my deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of firefighter Barry Martin. He typifies the bravery and courage of all our emergency service workers, particularly our firefighters. I have written to Firefighter Martin's family. The thoughts of everyone, from across the chamber, are very much with them at this time. I hope that, at this horrendously sad time for them, they will take some comfort from the love that has been expressed by all who knew and worked with Barry.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am particularly grateful for that reply.

I remind the Parliament that my wife is a primary school teacher and a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland.

We have calculated that, after the disruption of the pandemic, Scotland's school pupils have now lost more than 2 million days of education due to strike action. That will double if an agreement is not reached. Today, it is Dundee and Argyll and Bute. Tomorrow, it is South Lanarkshire and the Western Isles. Teachers care deeply about their pupils, and closing the gates is the last thing that they want to do, but the previous pay offer was made to them back in November, and there has been nothing new since then.

This generation of young people has had it harder than any other, and life-qualifying exams are coming over the horizon. Waiting for teachers to buckle or inflation to fall is not a strategy. What will the First Minister do personally to keep those school gates open?

The First Minister: First, I agree that no one wants to see—I certainly do not want to see—any further disruption to children's education. Alex Cole-Hamilton is right to point to the disruption that Covid caused to children and young people. I also share and echo the respect that he expressed for teachers.

I very much hope that we will reach a resolution and a pay agreement soon that avoids further disruption, but it is important that that continues to be discussed and negotiated through the mechanisms that are in place.

The final thing that I will say—I have said this before—is that the Government is not simply digging its heels in. Any resolution has to be fair and has to be affordable. On the point that we do not simply dig our heels in, we can point to other pay negotiations through which we have managed to reach resolutions that have avoided industrial action in other public services.

We will continue to seek a fair and affordable resolution with teachers that continues to reward them for the excellent work that they do.

Teacher Numbers

4. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities with regard to the proposals in some local authorities to reduce teacher numbers, given its commitment to increase teacher numbers by 3,500 by the end of the current parliamentary session. (S6F-01787)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am very firmly of the view that a reduction in teacher numbers would not be in keeping with our commitment to raise attainment and close the attainment gap in our schools. Indeed, as Christine Grahame has set out, this Government is committed to recruiting additional teachers and classroom assistants. We have provided an additional £145.5 million in this year's budget specifically to recruit additional teachers. That funding will also be included in next year's budget for councils, as part of our on-going commitment on teacher numbers.

The Deputy First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills met local government representatives on Tuesday to discuss how we can best deliver on that commitment and protect learning hours, and the education secretary will set out further steps to the Scottish Parliament over the coming days.

Christine Grahame: I thank the First Minister for her answer. As a former secondary school teacher—although it was some time ago—I have huge regard for the commitment of the profession. Indeed, I benefited, as someone from a working-class background, from state education through to university.

However, context is all, and budgets are, as a result of 10 per cent inflation, under severe pressure at Scottish Government and local government levels, with the same pressures applying in Wales and England, where teachers are on strike.

The issue of funding for education is not a Scottish Government problem: it is a United Kingdom-wide one and is a direct consequence of raging inflation, which Anas Sarwar sidestepped in his exchange with the First Minister. Is not it time that Rishi Sunak ditched his current policy of austerity to tackle the UK Government's self-inflicted inflation, increased funding to the Scottish Government—and Wales, while we are at it—and dealt with the fallout of a decade of failed Tory

policies, which have been exacerbated by Brexit—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Grahame—

Christine Grahame: Out of all the—[*Inaudible.*]

The Presiding Officer: Please draw your question to a close.

Christine Grahame: —four Tory chancellors in one year, and who could forget Liz Truss?

The First Minister: Christine Grahame is absolutely correct. The discomfort among Conservatives was palpable while she was speaking. I also detected a bit of discomfort among Labour members, although I am not quite so sure why that should be the case.

The fact of the matter is that the budget that this Government works within is constrained by decisions that are taken by UK Governments, which still hold most of the financial levers, but within that we are doing everything that we can do to protect public services and secure the fairest possible pay deals for the people who work in them.

However, Christine Grahame is right: the Parliament—and the Government—would be able to do so much more if Rishi Sunak loosened the purse strings, started to negotiate fair pay deals with public sector workers in England and increased funding to the devolved Administrations. Surely, all of us, across the chamber, should unite to call for that.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): We have heard a bizarre question followed by a bizarre answer. There is a bizarre situation that only Nicola Sturgeon could have concocted: reportedly, the Scottish National Party Government is now threatening to sanction local councils because of SNP underfunding. The First Minister is forcing councils to choose between deep cuts to local services and above-inflation tax increases. How else, exactly, does she expect them to pay for her commitment to increase teacher numbers?

The First Minister: It is only a couple of weeks since Stephen Kerr's leader in this Parliament said that the Government had to ensure that there will be no reductions in teacher numbers. The Tories should make up their minds about which side they are on.

However, if Stephen Kerr wants the Government to allocate more resources to local government or to any other part of public services, either he must tell us—as I challenged Anas Sarwar to do—where that money should come from, or his colleagues should call on their bosses

at Westminster to deliver more funding for the devolved Administrations.

Finally, the Conservatives should probably drop their call for tax cuts for the richest people in our society. Just this morning, I saw that Liz Smith has said that one of the priorities for the Scottish Government in our budget should be to narrow the tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK. That tax gap exists because we ask those who earn the most to pay a bit more. Obviously, what she said means that the Tories still want tax cuts for the richest, which would reduce funding for public services. There is no consistency or principle whatsoever coming from the Tories.

Disabled People (Support with Energy Costs)

5. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister what schemes the Scottish Government has in place to support disabled people with the energy costs of running lifesaving and independent living equipment at home. (S6F-01771)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): High energy prices, along with the wider cost of living crisis, are causing extreme challenges for many people, right now.

We provide a range of disability benefits to help disabled people and those with long-term conditions. The child winter heating assistance and carers allowance supplement provide financial support that is available only in Scotland, as does our new winter heating payment, which will begin in a few weeks. We have also doubled the fuel insecurity fund to £20 million, and some patients who use haemodialysis or oxygen equipment at home are already accessing financial support.

It is deeply regrettable that the United Kingdom Government is cutting, from the end of March, the support that is provided to hard-pressed families. I hope that it will reverse that decision and that members all across the chamber will call on it to do so, and that it will continue to provide the assistance that households need so badly at this time.

Jeremy Balfour: Given that the cost of running life-saving equipment, such as a ventilator, can reach as much as £750 a month, does the First Minister agree that energy costs are putting at risk the health and human rights of disabled people, and will the Scottish Government commit to an urgent meeting with me and stakeholders to discuss urgent action to support families to run life-saving and independent-living equipment?

The First Minister: I am happy to ask the relevant minister to take part in such a meeting, and we would be happy to discuss what more the Scottish Government can do.

I agree with Jeremy Balfour about the impact of sky-high energy costs, which is why I think that the UK Government, which holds the levers, has to do much more to help people with the impact of those costs. This Government is doing everything that we can do within our powers and resources. I have pointed to the range of disability benefits that we provide and, in particular, to the doubling of the fuel insecurity fund to £20 million, which will help some of those who are dealing with the kinds of impacts that Jeremy Balfour has set out.

We will continue to look at what more we can do, but in this case the UK Government needs to act to deal with the root causes of rising energy prices and to take action now to help those who are dealing with the impact of them.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The cost of living crisis is being felt most acutely by people with caring responsibilities and those who are in receipt of care.

The Scottish Government commissioned the independent review of adult social care, which included a recommendation to scrap non-residential care charges, but we know that action has not been forthcoming to deliver on that recommendation. The removal of non-residential social care charges would, overnight, improve the lives of more than 100,000 people in Scotland by relieving the financial pressure on their households. Why has the First Minister failed to listen to experts such as Derek Feeley, and to scrap non-residential care charges?

The First Minister: The commitment that we gave on that recommendation, which I agree is important, was to achieve that over the course of this parliamentary session. We are currently looking to see how quickly that might be possible within the financial constraints that we are talking about. I absolutely recognise how important the issue is, but we have to deal with it within the budgets that we have.

I will repeat what I said to Anas Sarwar earlier in the context of the budget for next year. Any member who wants to propose additional funding for any line in the budget is, of course, entitled to do so, but they have to accompany that with an explanation of where they think the additional resources should come from. That is the hard part of setting budgets; Opposition members who want to propose extra money for parts of the budget really cannot escape that responsibility.

Cost of Living Crisis

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to research commissioned by Citizens Advice Scotland, which reportedly found that people are struggling to

afford everyday goods, including period and hygiene products, and the energy costs associated with showering, bathing and laundry, due to the cost of living crisis. (S6F-01770)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We remain very concerned about the hardship that people are facing right now due to the cost of living crisis, which is not yet abating. The majority of the key policy levers are, of course, held by the United Kingdom Government, including those that are related to energy bills. We will continue to press the UK Government to use all the levers at its disposal to tackle the emergency on the scale that is required.

In the meantime, we will continue to do all that we can do to help households within the limited budgets and powers that we have. We have allocated almost £3 billion in this financial year to initiatives to help people with the cost of living crisis. That includes £1 billion to provide services and support that are not available anywhere else in the UK. As I said in response to the previous question, we have also doubled the fuel insecurity fund to £20 million this year and we recently announced £2.4 million for action to help tackle food insecurity.

Monica Lennon: I will follow up on two points on the levers that we have here. I think that since the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 took legal effect last August we have all been hugely impressed by the work that is being done by councils, schools and others to make free period products widely available. Along with period dignity campaigners, I am keen to meet the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government to discuss ways to build on that success, so that we can raise awareness more and help the people who are highlighted in the Citizens Advice Scotland survey.

Secondly, we all know that rip-off energy bills are exploiting people and putting their lives at risk. The whole rotten system needs to be dismantled but, in the meantime, people need urgent support. Can the First Minister guarantee that everyone who is due the winter heating payment in Scotland will receive it this month?

The First Minister: Social Security Scotland is taking forward roll-out of benefits and, of course, it is always the priority to make sure that people get benefits to which they are entitled as quickly as possible.

In terms of wider issues around energy bills, which I covered in response to a previous question, it is important that we continue to consider everything that we could do, but the key levers lie with the UK Government.

On period poverty, all of us across the chamber—Monica Lennon was clearly a key

person in this—should be proud of the progress on tackling period poverty. She is right to point to the progress that has been made, but she is also right to say that we should collectively look at how we can now build on that. I know that the social justice secretary would be happy to meet her and campaigners to discuss exactly how we might take that forward. I hope that on this—if not, perhaps, on many other issues that we discuss in the chamber—we can build some real consensus for the future.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

United Kingdom Economy (International Monetary Fund)

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): New analysis by the International Monetary Fund has found that the United Kingdom is set to be the only major economy to shrink in 2023, with all other developed nations experiencing growth, even sanctions-hit Russia. That, on top of everything else, will severely impact on devolved nations and our responsibilities.

Why does the First Minister think that the UK is performing so poorly compared with other economies? Could it be because of the perfect storm of Westminster's economic incompetence and a disastrous Brexit that Scotland did not vote for?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Natalie Don is absolutely right. There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, real discomfort on the Tory benches. Perhaps Tory members have just seen that another consequence of Tory economic and financial incompetence and mismanagement is that interest rates have been increased yet again by the Bank of England, which has real implications for people.

The IMF's forecast is deeply worrying, but it should come as no surprise. The Scottish Government and others in Scotland have repeatedly warned that Brexit, particularly the hard Brexit that was chosen by the UK Government, would be devastating to Scotland's economy and the UK as a whole. The economic impacts are already being felt. Britain's gross domestic product was 5.5 per cent lower by the second quarter of 2022 than it would have been had Brexit not occurred. The consequences of that economic incompetence are devastating for businesses and individuals alike. Thanks to Brexit, the UK is facing a worse cost of living crisis than elsewhere.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: That is the reality. I think that it is time that the UK Government, and, indeed, the main Opposition at UK level, woke up

to that fact and abandoned the disaster that has been Brexit.

CPR Training

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The British Heart Foundation is in Parliament today to raise awareness of the importance of learning cardiopulmonary resuscitation. My constituent Stephanie Bain had to perform CPR on her five-week-old baby after he stopped breathing in his cot. Neither Stephanie nor her partner knew how to do CPR on a baby, and I can only imagine how terrifying that must have been for them and their family. The family is now urging parents to learn vital first aid skills that could save the lives of their young children. My office has been in touch with Stephanie, and I am pleased to say that Finlay is now doing well. I have also reached out to the British Heart Foundation to encourage it to create digital content that shows parents how to perform CPR on children who are under the age of one. As February is heart month, will the First Minister support the campaign to ensure that everyone, especially parents, has access to CPR training, as it saves lives?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes I will—I am happy to give my support to that campaign. I welcome the British Heart Foundation to Parliament today and commend the organisation for the excellent work that it does, which has an impact on families across Scotland—we are very grateful to it for that. It is important that we work to raise awareness of education and training in CPR. I understand that the British Heart Foundation has an online tool called RevivR, which is about CPR. That is important, but there is more work that we can all do collectively. I am happy to give my support to that and to consider what more the Scottish Government can do to support those efforts.

Muirhouse Millennium Centre

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The Muirhouse millennium centre in my region is facing financial difficulty. Several meetings have been held to address the centre management's concern about the lack of future core funding, which could mean the risk of closure. When community centres are not funded properly, it is not only the centre that loses out; the families depending on them for support and help, particularly during the cost of living crisis, are left without a lifeline. Will the First Minister increase funding to local authorities to ensure that they have the necessary funds to support essential community centres such as the Muirhouse millennium centre?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): From my constituency, I know the importance of community centres and facilities, so I certainly

agree with the sentiment that is being expressed. The individual issue that the member has raised is for the local council. On the central question about whether the Scottish Government will further increase the allocation to local councils, as I said earlier, the draft budget already proposes an increase in resources to local government of more than £0.5 billion. However, as I said to the leader of the member's party some moments ago, if Labour wants to further increase that allocation, it is entitled to put forward that proposition, but it needs to point to the line in the budget where it thinks that we should take that money from. This afternoon and during the remainder of the budget process, we will wait to see whether any balanced proposals in that regard come from members on the Labour benches. However, based on the experience of past years, I will not be holding my breath.

Brexit (Social Care and Health)

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): This week marks the third anniversary of Brexit and last night, on the BBC, we heard Dr Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care outline the devastating impact that Brexit is having on our social care and health sectors. Dr Macaskill said that we have lost thousands of front-line staff because of Brexit and an immoveable visa and immigration system from Westminster.

Does the First Minister agree with Dr Macaskill and, if so, what does she think needs to happen to secure a better future for those sectors?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I agree with Donald Macaskill and I think that he was very clear in his comments last night when he said that we have lost thousands of front-line staff in nursing and in direct social care because of Brexit and because of the Westminster visa and immigration system. Of course, the wider cost crisis is also having an impact.

As a country, we need to find a way back to Europe. As a country, we need to find a way of ensuring that we have an immigration system that is not just humane but meets our social and economic needs. It is clear—and it is becoming clearer every day—that Scotland will not find either of those things as part of the Westminster system of government. The route to both is through Scotland becoming an independent country.

Deposit Return Scheme

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Incredibly, there is still no operational blueprint for the deposit return scheme, despite it launching in just a few months. No wonder businesses are tearing their hair out. Retailers are investing a quarter of a billion pounds in the scheme this year

alone, but they are being forced to take a best guess at how it is going to work. The Scottish Retail Consortium is now calling for a complete operational blueprint to be released by the end of the month. Can the First Minister confirm that that will happen—yes or no?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Circularity Scotland continues to work with businesses as they finalise operational delivery plans ahead of the launch in August. It is also developing and constructing the logistical network that will support the effective operation of the scheme. I will ask Lorna Slater, the relevant minister, to write to the member to set out further details of the steps that are being taken between now and the launch in August.

Winter Heating Payments

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Last night, it was confirmed that the Government cannot guarantee that the winter heating payments will be paid this month. As the First Minister said in response to my colleague, the Government has said that it is Department for Work and Pensions data that is the issue.

Ministers set a deadline of 31 January for the DWP to share that necessary data. The relevant minister confirmed in committee that the payments would be made in February if the Government got that data; it did, so I ask the First Minister, has the Government failed to properly plan for the delivery of the payment? Has it underestimated the time needed to properly execute the policy? Will our constituents get the payment this month or will the winter heating payment end up being the Scottish summer payment, paid too late to keep people warm this winter?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will continue, as we have done with all benefits, to ensure that people who are entitled to these benefits get the money timeously. We received the data from the DWP and payments will be made to the 415,000 people eligible for the payment automatically over the course of February and March.

The Presiding Officer: Ariane Burgess has the next question.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Apologies, Presiding Officer—I meant to press my button again to withdraw the question.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a brief pause while the gallery clears before we move on to members' business.

ME Services

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The Parliament is still sitting, so I ask the members of the public in the gallery who are leaving to do so quickly and quietly.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-06112, in the name of Sue Webber, on a Scottish Government-commissioned review of ME services and future action. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament notes that the Scottish Government commissioned and welcomed an independently-produced stakeholder review of the NICE guideline on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS), published on 5 July 2022; further notes that the review states that myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a complex chronic medical condition affecting an estimated 250,000 people in the UK and that around 20,000 people in Scotland are living with the condition, including in the Lothian region; highlights the four key symptoms characteristic of the condition, which are debilitating fatigue that is worsened by activity, post-exertional malaise (PEM)/symptom exacerbation, unrefreshing sleep and/or sleep disturbance, and cognitive dysfunction, and which affect multiple physiological systems and can fluctuate from mild to very severe in individuals and across the population affected; understands that the review recommends consideration be given to identifying the most effective approaches to improving GP knowledge, confidence and understanding of ME/CFS through an appropriate education programme, and further understands that the review recommends that pilot services should be funded in a selection of NHS boards to test the development of specialist services with patient involvement and third sector collaboration embedded in the design.

12:50

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am pleased to bring this debate on ME to Parliament today, and I am delighted that members of #MEAction Scotland are able to join us in the public gallery—I hope that they have managed to make it in—to hear what might be done to improve care for those in the grip of this debilitating condition. For ME sufferers, even making the trip here could worsen their symptoms, because the condition impairs the ability of cells to produce energy and increases post-exertional malaise—the worsening of symptoms following any activity. So, as I said, I am delighted to welcome them to the chamber.

More than two decades ago, the Scottish Parliament cross-party group on ME was formed, and, in 2017, the first millions missing event took place outside the Parliament and former MSP Gail Ross held a members' business debate. In September 2022, #MEAction Scotland met the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care,

Humza Yousaf, who said that progress needs to be made and that he did not want to speak to us again in six months and “not have moved forward”. Sadly, it is now almost six months since that meeting and little to no progress has been made.

ME is becoming Scotland's forgotten illness. Having met the team from #MEAction Scotland and having seen their sheer determination and passion as they continue to fight for targeted funding towards ME treatment by the NHS, I knew that I had to help in any way I can.

A constituent of mine, Jo Bussell Bruce, was an energetic, fit, and ambitious 28-year old manager in financial services with her whole life ahead of her. Jo is now 49 and has had ME for 21 years. She sent me her story, and I would like to read some of it out. She wrote:

“Like so many I've struggled with medical appointments over the years. I understand our doctors are overworked, underfunded and haven't been trained properly on ME, but they must take responsibility for the toxic culture around ME, Long Covid and Fibromyalgia.

At the chronic pain clinic in Leith, I was recommended graded exercise therapy (GET) by a doctor who wouldn't acknowledge my ME diagnosis. I explained that GET was about to be banned under the new NICE Guidelines.

Before that a doctor joked within earshot about my feeling the need to advise him of my 'mental health condition'.

Before that a neurologist tried to downplay my diagnosis to 'burnout'.

Before that it was another GP saying, 'we call it CFS now, that's the grown-up name'.

If you ask people with ME if they recognise themselves in my anecdotes, I guarantee they will say yes. Not 20% or 50%, all of them, and you'll be flooded with far worse stories than mine. We face systemic bias within the medical community that needs education and consequences.

My GP isn't uncaring, but we live in a time of evidence-based medicine. The Royal Colleges have refused to acknowledge that science has moved on and protects psychiatry's hold on research funding. Unfortunately for people like me they simply have more resources and status in society to keep pumping out false narratives about our disease.

So, I had to become more knowledgeable about my illness than most doctors and they don't hide their resentment about it. If you're in any doubt, read the Reddit threads about ME or Fibromyalgia and you'll see what they say of us and our diseases. They call us 'malingerers', 'delusional', 'heart-sink', 'drug seekers'. Would you trust your loved ones in those hands?"

That statement is shocking and the story is heartbreaking, but what makes it worse is that it is very common among sufferers of ME.

Another constituent, Brigid Ó Dochartaigh—I hope that I pronounced her name correctly—got in touch and asked me to share her story to highlight this important opportunity for MSPs to stand alongside people with ME and call on the Scottish

Government to implement the recommendations of the stakeholder report that the Government commissioned, which was produced last year. Brighid said:

“I am one of the more than 21,000 people in Scotland living with ME and one of the far too rapidly growing number of people who developed ME because of long covid. I was too sick to work for 13 months and lost a significant amount of income in that time. I’ve been left so ill that I can only work half time, from home, which has significantly altered my working role and I have no guarantee that my employer will facilitate me continuing to work remotely in the long term.

I’m too ill to socialise with friends, to travel, to visit family, or do most of the activities I love. Up until Covid and ME I regularly did fieldwork in remote areas of the world as part of my job as a geologist, and I was an ultramarathon runner. Now I can only walk for 20 minutes before having to stop, rest, and go home. I don’t think anyone would want my poor quality of life. It is unrelentingly hard to live like this, and there is no medical or social support.

In November 2020 I was referred to the NHS ME/CFS clinic in Edinburgh. The specialist physiotherapist and psychologist at the Edinburgh ... clinic were supportive and offered me all the help they could, but they had nothing to offer to help me get better—only to stop me getting ... worse.”

It is disappointing that there has been little progress in Scotland with how ME is diagnosed and managed, despite best practice guidance being available on how to support and treat patients, including guidance on the dangers of graded exercise encouraging people to “push through” symptoms.

As I said, I am here to make sure that the voices of sufferers are heard and that we amplify support for #MEAction Scotland’s campaign. I hope that members who take part in my debate will all help to raise awareness among other MSPs and the wider population. I am delighted to see so many people in the chamber after First Minister’s question time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick, who joins us remotely.

12:57

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am grateful to Sue Webber for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute. I have spoken before in the chamber about how being disabled often means that you have to become an advocate—for yourself and usually for others with the same condition, too. You become an activist, because you have to in order to get treatment, to get adjustments at work and to be listened to. I have been overwhelmed by the number of people who got in touch with me to share their stories and information and to make sure that I took part in the debate, which I am happy to do on their behalf.

Having also met #MEAction Scotland last year to discuss its concerns, I have been struck by how consistent and clear the asks from sufferers have been. There is no ambiguity and no murkiness—folk want their doctors to understand what their condition means; they want those who treat ME patients to know what may make the condition worse instead of better, so that they do not cause further harm; and they want clear guidelines so that doctors are armed with the information and confidence that they need to prescribe treatment and support, and so that patients can refer easily to guidance that they trust instead of feeling the need to undertake mass individual research to figure out what their condition means for them and what treatment they need. That is not an unreasonable expectation or an unreachable goal.

Chronic conditions vary widely. I know that, although certain types of physiotherapy and exercise might help me, they could cause long-term damage that is potentially irreversible to someone with ME. However, I have met a lot of people who have had such damage done to them or a loved one because someone who was involved in their care did not have the knowledge that they needed.

One constituent—Morag—shared a very emotional account with me, and, like others, she wanted me to use her story in today’s debate. I am grateful to her for taking the time to share her story—for what I am sure was not the first or probably the last time—after she could not meet me last year because of her condition. She first told me something very familiar. She knows that her GP is busy, so she speaks to them when a symptom becomes acute and she needs help with firefighting. That is really common among disabled people; there is no check-in for an overview of all the many symptoms that they struggle with every day, so they go to the doctor when a symptom gets really bad. Over time, they end up managing more and more serious symptoms without medical intervention and accept, as normal, things that would have been terrifying earlier in their diagnosis. Because my constituent has a chronic condition, a more managed approach, which allows her to discuss all the things that she is barely managing day in and day out, could really improve her life and give her the space to raise, and receive help with, slightly less scary and immediate symptoms. However, that needs a specialist service.

A few constituents have mentioned comments by Jason Leitch, who said that, while there is no Scottish guideline for ME, NICE guidelines should be used. However, my constituent does not have a care and support plan or a consultant, so she does not have specialist help or multidisciplinary input. NICE guidelines being met is not the reality for ME sufferers who have been in touch with me, and

they want a Scottish guideline. My constituent described the added stress of coping alone and how that makes her condition worse. Without managed support, she is so limited by her condition; who knows how much better—or, at least, less difficult—her life would be with specialist help?

I have written to the Highland, Orkney, Shetland, Grampian and Western Isles NHS boards about individual cases, but, when there is such a clear pattern, it shows that national guidance and pressure are needed.

13:01

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate my friend Sue Webber on securing this important debate.

ME affects some 20,000 people across Scotland, and those who live with ME often have very different experiences of the condition. Their symptoms fluctuate severely, which leads to the need for high-level specialist care. Symptoms include extreme pain, post-exertion malaise and cognitive dysfunction, which have a debilitating impact not just on people's physical health, but on their mental health, careers, education and relationships—all of which can be severely affected by the condition.

I will use my short time today to share some of the experiences of which I have been told by constituents who are living with ME. Many people have been in contact with me since the motion went before Parliament. They range in ages, life situations and symptoms, but they all agree that more must be done to support them and, crucially, the people who support them, including their families.

Sarah, from the Isle of Luing, was a senior physiotherapist for 25 years and she enjoyed mountaineering and long-distance walking, but, as a result of ME, she now struggles to walk more than a few metres. She requires an electric chair for any further distance and is mostly sofa and bed bound. She wrote movingly to me, saying that she felt lucky to have had such a fulfilling life prior to her ME diagnosis but that she worries for young people whose lives are abruptly left without those active experiences and memories. I agree with her. She has a good local GP, who has been able to provide—

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Donald Cameron: Yes, of course.

Clare Adamson: I thank Donald Cameron for his contribution, and I am grateful for the other contributions today. Perhaps we also ought to remember that there are young people with ME,

who are often missing out on educational opportunities and opportunities to take part in the activities that he has just been talking about. Does he agree that there needs to be a consistent approach to supporting young people with ME in our schools?

Donald Cameron: I thank Clare Adamson for her intervention, and I am very glad that she made that point. I completely agree that there needs to be a consistent approach and that we must remember young people in this discussion. In a moment, I will talk about a young person who had ME at the age of only six.

Many people who live in rural communities struggle to access help from the NHS, so more has to be done to widen access. My constituent Sarah, who I was talking about, says that ME is not taken with the necessary seriousness and that its physical impact is not sufficiently recognised.

Another constituent, who wishes to remain anonymous, told me that his experience of ME is one of feeling abandoned and stigmatised. He feels that, from the onset of his symptoms through to diagnosis and having to settle into that new life, he was left to figure out everything for himself. He said that, without counselling and the help that he receives from voluntary organisations such as the Dochas Carers Centre in Lochgilphead, he would find it difficult to make the best of his life.

I was contacted by another constituent, who cares for her son. She told me that he has not seen a GP for two and a half years and that, when he does need to see a GP, it is often a struggle to find one who recognises ME as a physical condition as well as a physiological one.

All of those stories—I wish that I had time to recount more of them—have common themes: that ME is a legitimate and debilitating condition that is still not fully understood; that there is often a lack of access to NHS services and treatment, which is often provided by the voluntary sector and by relatives instead; and that those living with ME want to see much more investment in finding a cure so that they can go back to living the lives that they used to lead.

This debate must be the start of a change. We need change and action from the Scottish Government, and it is vital that people living with ME are at the forefront of any developments.

I will finish with a story of hope. It is about someone whose daughter had ME between the ages of six and 19, which is a reminder that ME can afflict people from a very early age. With treatment, she recovered and, at the age of 32, she is healthy, in full-time work and living independently. We need more of those stories, and it is time for the Scottish Government to take action.

13:06

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank Sue Webber for bringing to the chamber this debate on the Scottish Government-commissioned review of ME services. I welcome the review, although it is important that this is not the end of the story but, rather, the start of real change.

#MEAAction Scotland has been fighting for proper funding for and research on the condition for many years. Its #MillionsMissing rally that took place in front of the Parliament last year was a challenge to policy makers and those who deliver services. We heard testimony from people who suffer from ME and chronic fatigue syndrome; they spoke about how they often feel ignored and unseen by healthcare professionals, who do not know how to treat them because of a lack of information and understanding.

I have been contacted, as others have, by many individuals and families about the lack of services, and I thank them for their powerful testimony. They tell me that their quality of life is depleted, with many being unable to work, and that stress about paying bills consumes what little energy they have.

The story of Amy, a 16-year-old with ME, is absolutely concerning. Her family told me that

“support has been shocking. Initially nobody advised her to rest: she tried to push on and got much worse. Her paediatrician was unable to help her. Eventually the paediatrician confessed she knew little about the illness.”

There are currently no specialist consultants for ME in Scotland and only one specialist nurse, despite figures showing that a typical GP practice of 10,000 patients will have 20 to 40 people with ME. In a recent survey of practising GPs, 70 per cent thought that ME is rare, and 30 per cent thought it is psychological and not physical. However, in the past 10 years, the Scottish Government has funded only two pieces of research into ME—£45,000 was given to fund half of a PhD project, which amounts only to less than £1 per person. That is clearly inadequate for a condition that affects so many people.

The Scottish economy loses out, too. The estimated cost of ME to the economy is £360 million per annum, or £17,000 each year for each person with ME. ME does not just cause a loss of workforce due to exhaustion and other symptoms; it also has a knock-on effect on the families of people who require care at home: 81 per cent of carers are husbands, wives or partners, and 16 per cent are parents or children. Many of those carers must reduce the hours that they work or give up their jobs completely in order to provide the care that a loved one needs.

Those issues are not exclusive to people with ME and CFS: people with long Covid report many

of the same symptoms as those with ME, and testimonies have shown similar treatment by healthcare professionals when people are seeking diagnosis. Let us join things together, because the money that has been granted to treat long Covid does not go nearly far enough; it amounts to just £16 per person. I welcome the COVID-19 Recovery Committee’s inquiry into long Covid, which I believe is an opportunity to get right how we treat that condition. I also believe that the inquiry will have knock-on effects. Long Covid and ME should not be treated as two separate entities—we can learn from both and put the solutions in place for both.

The conditions are debilitating. They affects hundreds of thousands of people, and should be treated as having the same severity as any other medical condition.

People with ME/CFS have waited a long time. The Scottish Government should implement the recommendations from the review without delay and it should dedicate proper funding to ME/CFS and long Covid as a matter of urgency. For too long, people with the conditions have been ignored and let down. It is time that they received the recognition that they so rightly deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart, who is joining us remotely.

13:10

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Sue Webber for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I also thank #MEAAction Scotland and Action for ME, which provided briefings before the debate.

I welcome Sue Webber’s motion and the recommendations of the review of the NICE guidelines, which are outlined in the motion. They are:

“that ... consideration be given to identifying the most effective approaches to improving GP knowledge, confidence and understanding of ME/CFS through an appropriate education programme”

and

“that pilot services should be funded in a selection of NHS boards to test the development of specialist services with patient involvement and third sector collaboration embedded in the design”.

The outcome for any rural or islands health board that is selected to be part of a pilot scheme will be especially important to people who are living with ME in Shetland and other island areas, so I ask the minister to address the question whether an islands health board will be considered for inclusion in the pilot scheme.

ME is a much-misunderstood condition, with symptoms that fluctuate from mild to very severe

among individuals who live with it. Some 20,000 people across Scotland have been diagnosed with ME. That is not only a statistic—each of them represents a person, a family and a story. The review will not be worth the hard work that has already gone into it if it does not go some way towards improving, empowering and assisting those 20,000 people's lives.

Unlike other conditions, ME is not concentrated in one part of the population: anyone can be diagnosed with it. I am sure that those of us who are speaking in this important debate know someone who has been affected by ME. Perhaps it is someone who has had the debilitating illness for decades, is unable to function fully, has had to take time off or even give up work, and yet is considered in some ill-informed views to be malingering—as has been described by other members—when nothing could be further from the truth. I hope for a society that better understands ME and is better informed about how it treats the people who are affected by it. ME impacts mental health as well as physical health.

I know of a young person who has lost many years to the illness. They are often bed bound, and they and their family have had to deal with much over the years. They have lost time as a teenager—that very important period of maturing from childhood into adulthood—and those years cannot be replaced. They have lost education and socialisation, and it affects all the family.

As the #MEAction briefing tells us, children as young as five are affected, and peak onset of symptoms is around 13 to 15 years of age. We need to look at the services that are available to those young people, because there is a lack of agreement about the diagnostic criteria for paediatric cases, which means that there is little reliable data on the prevalence of ME among children and adolescents.

The 2020 NICE guideline for ME advises that a child or young person with suspected ME should be referred to a paediatrician and then on to a paediatric ME specialist team. However, #MEAction has found that that process is flawed, that paediatricians across Scotland are not suitably trained to diagnose and support young people with ME, and that they do not have access to specialists for onward referral or for guidance and support. Healthcare professionals need the confidence to diagnose young people correctly.

More research is needed into causes and treatments. Action for ME is working with the University of Edinburgh to investigate genetic causes of ME. Anyone aged over 16 with an ME diagnosis can sign up to take part in the study.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the calls on the Scottish Government by Action for ME: that it

develop the national strategy, ensure that the new NICE guidance is implemented correctly across Scotland and support all children with ME to have access to trained hospital paediatricians and community services.

13:14

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank Sue Webber for securing this important debate. I extend my thanks to all those with ME who have reached out to Scottish Green members of the Scottish Parliament to share their stories. I understand that when a person's symptoms are severe, even writing an email can be enough to trigger a flare-up, so I am grateful to all those who have taken the time to share their experiences.

I join colleagues from across the chamber in welcoming the report of the Scottish stakeholder review of the NICE guideline on ME. Myalgic encephalomyelitis—often referred to as ME for short—is a long-term condition that affects around 20,000 people in Scotland. ME is a complicated condition that can vary significantly among different people, so it is extremely important that we accept and adopt some of the key changes suggested in the review. A central part of that is supporting changes in NICE guidelines and ending the cynicism and disbelief that people who live with ME experience in relation to their condition. It is important that we support those who are living with ME by acknowledging their condition, and that we ensure that others who might have the condition are believed and encouraged to come forward and seek medical support.

As we have heard, ME is a condition with varying symptoms that are specific to each individual. Common symptoms include fatigue, sleep disturbance, issues with recovery from physical activities and cognitive issues around memory and concentration. The severity and prevalence of symptoms can vary widely from individual to individual.

There is no specific test to diagnose ME, which makes diagnosis and treatment difficult for many people. Again, I underscore the importance of having a debate on the issue. Post pandemic, now is a vital time to advance the discussion around ME in the public domain. I am pleased to see the Government's statement regarding the review, and I welcome its support for the NICE guideline.

I would like to focus on the experience of some of my constituents in Central Scotland. One theme that emerged from constituents is the lack of belief among healthcare professionals in patients' ability to advocate for their own healthcare. Even though the new NICE guideline on ME, which was published almost two years ago, advised against use of treatments including graded exercise

therapy, some patients with ME are still being recommended that treatment by doctors in Scotland. One woman described how, during her first appointment in June 2022, the doctor said that he knew that graded exercise therapy got a bad rap, but that it could be effective for some people. When she replied that she would never engage in graded exercise therapy because her daughter's ME had become severe due to constant pressure on her to do more and to push herself beyond her energy limits, the doctor justified his advice with what the patient believed was further misinformation about deconditioning. That is just one example from many stories of patients who feel that they have little choice but either to accept advice, even if it goes against the research that has been produced by charities that have campaigned on ME, or to be labelled as refusing to engage with their care.

When people with ME need to become their own best advocate, they become less trusting that our healthcare system will acknowledge and address their medical needs. We still have a long way to go in understanding how patients can manage ME long term and avoid issues continuing to appear. I would appreciate the minister outlining actions that have been taken, or are due to be taken, on the report's recommendation that pilots be funded in various health boards to develop specialist services. I am pleased that patient involvement will be an important part of that work; I fully support that and the third sector collaboration that is to be embedded in the design.

I thank #MEAction Scotland for all the work that it is doing to support individuals with ME. Its advocacy and policy work have done much to give the debate greater prominence, and for the betterment of individuals who live with the condition.

However, we should be clear that ME is not a rare condition: its prevalence is four in 1,000 people in Scotland. It is vital that we begin to acknowledge that the condition is prevalent across the population and that we build in support measures for people to come forward and gain the diagnosis and support that they need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Sue Webber to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Sue Webber*]

Motion agreed to.

13:19

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I think that that took Ms Webber by surprise, but she coped well.

I congratulate the member on securing the debate. I remember as far back as the days when ME was labelled “yuppie disease”, with the inference that it was a middle-class condition—at best psychosomatic and, at worst, just plain, privileged self-indulgence. Thank goodness that we have moved on, albeit not enough, and that ME is recognised by more people as a neurological condition.

It is certainly recognised as a neurological condition on the NHS Inform website, which says:

“Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a long term (chronic) neurological condition that affects the nervous and immune systems.

People with ME/CFS experience severe pain and fatigue ... when the body is not able to recover after using even small amounts of energy.”

The condition

“feels very different from ordinary tiredness. It might take a day or 2 to kick in after physical, mental, or emotional exertion ... It doesn't go away with sleep or rest and affects everyday life ... The symptoms ... vary from person to person.”

Sometimes,

“you'll be able to do some normal everyday activities. At other times, symptoms may get worse, affecting your daily life.”

Some

“physical or mental activities, or combinations of activities, can leave people with ME/CFS feeling completely exhausted. It can also lead to an increase in other symptoms.”

However, the issue, is that

“There's no single test to detect ME/CFS. A diagnosis is made after other possible known causes for symptoms have been excluded.”

I support the comments that long Covid might have opened up more minds to the condition, whose varying impacts add to the complexities in diagnosis and around treatment—if suitable—and both physical and emotional support.

I, too, will give examples. I recall a colleague many years ago who suffered from ME when little was known about it. By way of explanation of how the condition impacted him, he told me how he could shave normally one day but could barely move the next, as if his internal electric circuitry had rebelled. The dramatic changes from one day to the next that the condition can bring means that people sometimes accuse others—wrongly—of faking it, or as Sue Webber said, of malingering.

I have the consent of a constituent to relay her experience and that of her son. She wrote:

"I'm happy for you to use my story if it's anonymous, as in 'a constituent', or first name only, please. This is more for my son's privacy than my own. Here is our story in short. When my son was 14, his life changed dramatically. He had been academically gifted, sporty and generally a social and happy boy who enjoyed life. He came down with 'a bug' that he never recovered from, and was later diagnosed with CFS/ME. For two years, he was housebound and unable to go further than our back garden, too unwell to attend school and isolated from friends. My son was offered no treatment and support was almost non-existent. I gave up my job to look after him. Everything was a struggle as this condition is hugely misunderstood. CFS/ME is much more than debilitating fatigue. He also suffers muscle aches, stomach pain, headaches, cognitive fog which makes learning very difficult, sleep disturbance and the fatigue affects everything he does. I spend my time caring for him and researching possible treatment or supplements that could help his recovery even a little. We're now 4 years in and we have no support apart from a private specialist that we fund ourselves. We have spent thousands over the past few years on private consultations, supplements and medications to help his condition. Recovery is slow and costly, isolating and lonely."

I note the complexities of the condition and I look forward to hearing the minister's response to members' contributions. I thank the member for bringing this important debate to the chamber. We have debated ME a few times, but we need to keep alert to the issue.

13:23

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): First, I congratulate my colleague Sue Webber on bringing this member's debate to the chamber today. As we have already heard, myalgic—I will not even try to pronounce it; we all know what I am talking about. Chronic fatigue syndrome is a complex medical condition that affects around a quarter of a million people in the United Kingdom, with around 20,000 people in Scotland living with the condition.

The Scottish Government commissioned a report that seeks to improve medical education and raise awareness of this devastating neurological condition. It is really important that clear and fit-for-purpose treatment and support pathways are in place to ensure that everything is done to provide the most appropriate support for everyone who presents with ME symptoms. I agree with other members, including Jackie Baillie, that not enough is being done at the moment.

Symptoms of ME are similar to, and have the same impact as, long Covid, which affects an estimated 192,000 people in the UK. It is understood that, for the majority of people with ME or CFS, the trigger that led to long-term disability was also a viral infection.

The report recommends that

"Pilot services are funded in a selection of NHS boards to test the development of specialist services with patient involvement and third sector collaboration embedded in the design."

I hope that NHS Dumfries and Galloway gets involved in such a move.

The charity Action for ME provides much-needed support for people of all ages, including healthcare services, as well as funding and carrying out research into the condition. Alongside providing targeted information, support, healthcare services and advocacy to children, young people and adults with ME, it offers peer support services that reduce the isolation that often comes with the condition.

That brings me to the notable work that is being carried out in my constituency by the Dumfries and Galloway ME and Fibromyalgia Network. I have met the group on a couple of occasions and they are an inspiring bunch. It is heartbreaking to hear how the condition has completely taken over their lives and how young and not so young people who were once physically fit and active in work and leisure struggle daily with debilitating symptoms.

I remember a period in my early 20s when I faced similar symptoms. Thankfully, it was short lived. However, I remember going out to move cattle and ending up lying in the gutter sobbing because of the feeling of absolute despair at not being able to do anything and having no idea why. The frustration was overpowering.

The board of trustees of the DGMEFM Network is entirely made up of volunteers. Each comes with varied life and work experience and provides invaluable help in running the network. The charity, led by its chair, Eileen Longworth, has approaching 400 members and a further 430 members on its informative Facebook page, which allows people living with the condition to socialise with each other whenever they want to and are able to. Crucially, it also allows them to swap experiences and information.

In the past year, the network has been fortunate enough to secure £6,000 from the community mental health and wellbeing fund to start a range of projects locally, including free soup and sandwich facilities at its pop-up meetings. As the organisation moves forward, regular face-to-face meetings are beginning to start again. A Zoom facility will enable it to stage hybrid social meetings, where attendance can be virtual or in person. That will enable network members to attend no matter their situation. During the pandemic, Zoom was invaluable in cutting down the feeling of isolation for many network members across the region. The funding will allow the group to continue to allow those who are unable to attend in person to participate in craft workshops and to implement wellbeing workshops with a

range of topics from mindfulness and yoga to soap making and calligraphy. Other outstanding work carried out by the network includes providing access to available services and valuable advice on where people can seek out support.

I will finish with the words from one member of the group:

"I have been off sick for months and feel very isolated and like I'm missing out on the fun bits of life."

The network

"really boosted my mood, self-esteem and I felt like going for a walk afterwards because I felt much better."

As members can see, the friendship, support and kindness that such a network can bring goes a long way to improving people's lives. My thanks go to everyone—all the volunteers, including those who live with those awful conditions—who goes the extra mile every day to help make people's lives a little bit better.

13:28

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate Sue Webber on leading the debate so well and thank the Government—that is not something that I regularly do—for commissioning the independent review.

A friend told me the story of an encounter this week. He was out campaigning and met a voter on the doors. The voter looked completely drained and utterly exhausted. He went through his usual spiel, but she stopped him mid-flow. She said that she was drained and exhausted, and that she could no longer talk or stand. She could not even take a leaflet because she would not be able to concentrate for long enough to read it. How anybody could resist a Liberal Democrat leaflet with a good bar chart on it is beyond me. However, the inability to concentrate is apparently one of the symptoms of the condition.

That epitomises the all-consuming nature of the condition: it is largely invisible, but it brings down healthy, active people. For too long, they have not been believed, but they are being believed now. We do not have to stand for the current level of services that are in place; we can match our belief in those people with the level of service that they deserve.

One nurse is leading the way. Keith Anderson, who works at the Ladybank clinic in my constituency, provides Scotland's only specialist nurse-led service for patients with ME/CFS. Keith devises individual management plans for patients, with appropriate therapies that are based on energy conservation, activity management, relaxation techniques, sleep regulation, pain relief, lifting depression and anger and goal setting. He

also uses some aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy in some cases.

Those therapies may be given individually or in groups, at home or in a specialist clinic. Keith has links with the social work department for the provision of useful equipment, respite care, home help, personal care and much more. He can refer patients to home and community education services, and to disability advisers at university and college.

Keith also has contacts with the Department for Work and Pensions regarding benefits, welfare rights, jobcentres, occupational health and so much more, including, importantly, with paediatric and family support units, which has led to the development of a care pathway for children and young adults in Fife. He is—quite rightly—praised highly by all his patients; I hear about him in all parts of Fife. That model of care should not, however, be restricted to North East Fife—it should be available everywhere across the country. Nevertheless, it shows what can be done.

We need to know more, we need investment in biomedical research and clinical trials, and we need to be informed by the research priorities that were set out by the James Lind Alliance priority setting partnership for ME in 2022.

We can do so much more, but there are examples of care. Good work has been done. For example, great work is being done in Dumfries and Galloway by the group that Finlay Carson mentioned. Sue Webber is right that funding is required—we need it to improve services, and it needs to be guaranteed for the long term. That funding should be available for people who have been left behind for far too long.

13:32

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I speak in this debate simply to give voice to constituents who have contacted me to describe their condition, because I think that hearing their words in the chamber is very important. Their voices have to be heard.

First, I refer to the story of David, who wrote to me to say:

"I am speaking up for my wife and daughter who both have ME. My daughter has suffered with ME for more than 4 years. This illness has transformed her from a 13 year old that was full of life involved in Youth Theatre, dance/signing/playing musical instruments and participating in sports to someone confined to her bed 24/7; sensitive to light, heat and noise and debilitated by pain and brain fog.

We have experienced the lack of understanding within NHS due to previous NICE guidelines, lack of GP and consultant knowledge of ME and the related illnesses. Initially my daughter was offered cognitive behavioural therapy, and graded exercise therapy. Neither addressed her symptoms. It was only when able to participate in online

consultations with specialists in England that we were able to make progress in diagnoses and have started to address some of the symptoms that have caused the decline in her health.

Although unable to participate in education she has also experienced a failure to provide suitable alternatives to in person schooling. Despite the pandemic the online offering for schooling for those who physically cannot attend school due to illness has still to be developed."

I am grateful to David for sharing that story with me, and I am privileged to share it with members today.

I also received the following testimony from Jules, who said:

"For over ten years I was a therapist and devoted my life to helping others as best I could.

I first became ill but kept going and put it down to general aches and pains. I finally had to give up what I loved with a final diagnosis of severe ME.

I've been to psychology to be told it's all in my head, pain management to be told to push through the pain and physiotherapy who told me my muscles were so weak there was nothing they could do!

I've been on so many prescribed medications and vitamins; I was taking in excess of 22 tablets a day and yet I would still crash.

I am 90% house and bed bound and my GP has exhausted all avenues for me therefore—as I was told—'you must try and manage your illness as best you can.'

My husband works long shifts and I'm home alone for at least 10 hours a day; sometimes I have to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the bathroom and I can go days on end without being able to bathe or shower as I'm just too exhausted to move!

I feel like so many others that we are just left to rot; I feel like my mental health is now suffering as I become more and more isolated from society and there's no one to help me and many others just like me.

I am severely fatigued to the point that I cannot stand upright otherwise I get so dizzy I'm about to faint. I also have severe laboured breathing but there's nothing recommended but rest and resting doesn't cure ME.

I don't wallow in self-pity. I spend what time I can online being an advocate for Action for ME and whenever I can, I offer support to other members of the social media groups I am in and share my stories and experiences.

I have a devoted and caring husband who does everything he physically can to look after me but it's tough when I'm home alone for so long with no care.

I try to do what I can to keep my spirits up but on days when I crash for no reason and I can't watch TV, or read a book, I have to have my curtains drawn and be in a darkroom. Sometimes I even need soft silicone earplugs to block out any noise as I get cognitive dysfunction too!

This is not living Stephen this is just existing!"

The words of David and Jules are a plea to the minister to act now on the independent report that she has in her hands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Maree Todd, to respond to the debate.

13:37

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am pleased to respond to this important motion on behalf of the Government. I hope that, if I speak quickly, I will be able to respond to all the issues that have been raised.

I welcome today's debate and I am grateful to everyone who has contributed their time and energy to it, and to the members of the public who have joined us in the public gallery. I am particularly grateful for the testimonies that we have heard from those with lived experience. As a minister, it is a powerful experience to hear the voices of the people of Scotland talking directly to Government.

It is clear from the voices that we have heard this afternoon that many people with ME/CFS have felt stigmatised or disbelieved by those who do not understand their condition. Therefore, the first thing that I have to say is that I want that stigma and disbelief to end. We have made a visible commitment to supporting the recent changes to the ME/CFS guidance, and we continue to work to raise awareness of the condition and the impact on those who live with it.

It is also clear that there remains much to do in further co-ordinating the care of people with ME/CFS, and we are working hard to progress that. We want to get it right for people, wherever they are in Scotland. I assure those living with ME/CFS that we are listening, and we hear you.

We know that it is critical that we listen to our stakeholders about what changes would be most impactful. That is why, last summer, we commissioned an independent stakeholder review of the NICE ME/CFS guideline. In doing so, we captured the input of the third sector, lived experience and clinical partners on how we drive forward the implementation of the guideline recommendations in Scotland. We specifically solicited views from parents and carers in that exercise because we absolutely recognise the importance of good-quality care and the right to education for young people living with ME/CFS.

Our neurological care and support framework is a five-year national strategy to improve care for people with neurological conditions, including ME/CFS. Through the framework, we have spent more than £2.1 million over the past two years on improving neurological care across Scotland. We have also continued to work with our UK Government counterparts to explore areas of shared interest on ME/CFS, and have contributed to the production of the UK action plan for ME/CFS, which will be produced shortly.

We are fully supportive of the NICE guideline on ME/CFS, and in order to raise awareness, our

national clinical director took the step of writing to all health boards to highlight the guideline and key changes in practice regarding graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. I wrote a similar letter to the Scottish board for academic medicine, which cascaded the information to Scottish medical schools.

I am pleased to say that we have partially updated the Scottish good practice statement on ME/CFS to insert the key changes in practice from the NICE guideline, and we will publish that on the Scottish Government's website this month. It is not a comprehensive rewrite but rather a first step in creating a living document that is situated with us and can be further reviewed and updated with partners.

Finlay Carson: Nearly 22 years ago, Merryn Fergusson, the wife of our greatly missed former Presiding Officer, Sir Alex Fergusson, wrote a book about her son Chris, entitled "What is Wrong with ME—A Case of Childhood Myalgic Encephalomyelitis: The Illness and the Controversy", which looks at problems and misunderstandings around ME going back to the 1930s. Little progress has been made since that book was written. When does the minister expect fit-for-purpose care pathways to be in place in every health board in Scotland to ensure that we do not leave people behind and so that they get the treatment that they need?

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree that progress has been slow. As we have all articulated, one of the blocks is the level of stigma and disbelief experienced by people with ME, although I believe that we are overcoming that particular hurdle.

We are currently liaising and working with the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland on how to make progress on the condition, and how to disseminate and promote the guidance.

We have heard a lot in the debate about the desire for specialist ME/CFS services. ME/CFS can present a broad range of symptoms and we know there is no one-size-fits-all response. We want people to be able to access care in a setting that is appropriate and as close to home as possible.

Our strengthening of Scotland's primary care workforce through the recruitment of multidisciplinary teams is making it easier for people to access that kind of care and support. We have now recruited more than 3,000 professionals, including community nurses and physiotherapists, with increased funding of £170 million this year to support the further development of multidisciplinary teams in primary care.

By listening to what matters to people with ME/CFS, and using the principles of realistic medicine to involve them in decisions about their

care, we can deliver patient-centred support and reduce inappropriate care.

I agree with members who said that there may be lessons that we can learn from long Covid that might be helpful for ME. Following our discussions with stakeholders, we recently surveyed all Scottish health boards to better understand their care pathways and provision for people living with ME/CFS. We plan to publish that data by May this year in a report that will review the boards' implementation of the updated NICE guidance, highlight areas of good practice and identify where further support is needed to embed the guidance. That data will undoubtedly be helpful in identifying suitable places for pilots.

We have heard calls today for increased medical education and training, and I understand the importance of supporting health and social care professionals in learning about the diagnosis and management of ME/CFS. That is why we have funded the creation and dissemination of an online continuing professional development course on ME/CFS for all GPs and health professionals in Scotland, which has been produced by Action for ME and partners. By September last year the module had been accessed 1,300 times, with evaluation data showing that it significantly improves participants' ability to diagnose and manage ME/CFS. I am also pleased to report that NHS Education Scotland has created a practice-based learning module on ME/CFS for primary care clinicians. I understand that NES is currently reviewing feedback from the third sector on the module ahead of piloting it with GPs.

We all recognise the importance of research for better understanding of ME/CFS and the development of effective new approaches to the condition. Through the chief scientist's office, we are inputting to the UK Clinical Research Collaboration's ME/CFS research group, which is working to increase research capacity and the number and quality of ME/CFS research funding applications.

Presiding Officer, I close by saying that—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Maree Todd: I am sorry; I am in the closing part of my speech.

We will continue to listen to the human stories and individual experiences behind the issues that have been raised today. We will continue working to identify how to drive up standards of care in ME/CFS, better embed the clinical guidelines and encourage research into the causes of and potential treatments for ME/CFS.

I assure members that we will continue to work with those with lived experience, the third sector and clinical partners to continue the improvement

work that we have begun, and to maximise quality of life for people with ME/CFS across Scotland.

13:45

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this time round is education and skills.

I make the usual request that members who seek to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. There is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions, so I make a plea for succinct questions and succinct answers, wherever possible.

Additional Support for Learning

1. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve access to additional support for learning. (S6O-01852)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): All children and young people should receive the support that they need to reach their full potential. Local authorities are responsible for identifying and meeting the additional support needs of their pupils.

On 30 November 2022, we published our updated additional support for learning action plan, which outlines the progress that we have made and the further work that we will do in that area to ensure that all children can access the support that they need.

Donald Cameron: About 21,000 children in Scottish schools are on the autism spectrum, and levels of educational access for them vary across the country. The National Autistic Society Scotland has told me that local authorities need to be better at recording different types of absences, rather than using the catch-all category of authorised absences. That would better support young people. Will the cabinet secretary look at ways in which that can be done, so that more targeted support can be provided to young people on the autism spectrum?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One of the aspects that we have just taken into the national improvement framework relates to attendance. An important aspect of that is ensuring that the national agencies support our local government colleagues to look at who is attending school and why some pupils are not attending school, and to

assist people to go back to school when it is appropriate for them to do so.

I very much take the point that Donald Cameron makes. It is very important that we look at why children—including children who are neurodiverse and have autism—are not attending school and give them support that is particular to them.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer about children with autism.

The Scottish National Party's 2021 manifesto said:

"Scotland's education system should be accessible to all young people. We want all children and young people to get the support that they need to reach their full potential."

We have the highest number of pupils who require additional support on record—that is the case at primary school and secondary school level. At the same time, numbers of specialist staff and support are being slashed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Martin Whitfield: Is the Scottish Government proud of its record at this stage? How will it change that record?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Of course, all teachers are responsible for the provision of support to pupils with additional support needs, not just the teachers whose role is specifically related to support for learning. I point out that, in 2021, 1,036 extra pupil support assistants were recruited. That built on the previous year's increase, and it exceeds the programme for government commitment.

On teacher numbers and on pupil support assistants, there is more to do, but the Government is determined to carry that through.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Beatrice Wishart joins us remotely.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Another impact of Covid-19 has been a sharp increase in concerns about children's speech, language and communication development. That is a phenomenon that has been recorded by health visitors. The greatest increase has been found at two years old, which is a crucial milestone in speech and language development.

What additional educational learning support in children's communication development can the cabinet secretary commit to today, to head off concerns of a looming spoken language crisis in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Beatrice Wishart is quite right to point out the concerns that exist about the impact that Covid, in particular, has had.

The Government has focused on the issue that she raises, and I will be happy to write to her with further details on what is happening on that in education and in health.

Foster Carers (Recruitment)

2. Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its action to recruit more foster carers. (S6O-01853)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): As part of keeping the Promise, we are committed to ensuring that children and young people who are looked after away from their own families and homes are provided with caring and loving foster families.

I am aware that the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have put pressure on foster carer capacity and that the situation has been worsened by the widening pressures that the social work sector faces, such as the pressures associated with the conflict in Ukraine and the issue of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Although responsibility for recruiting a sufficient number of foster carers lies with local authorities, we are actively working with key national and local partners to identify action that we can take collectively, now and in the future, to improve the situation.

Joe FitzPatrick: A key aspect of encouraging more foster carers is ensuring that the right financial support is in place. Will the minister provide an update on discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about progressing the recommendations of the review of care allowances?

Clare Haughey: I agree with Mr FitzPatrick that ensuring that the right financial support and practical help are in place will be critical in encouraging more people to become foster carers. That is why the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to delivering a national allowance as quickly as possible. We know that that has taken longer than was originally anticipated, and we share the frustrations of care givers and those working with them. I assure Mr FitzPatrick that we are looking at all available options to make that happen. My officials will next meet COSLA on Tuesday 7 February.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Roz McCall for a brief supplementary question.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note that the minister commented on some external factors, but last week's shocking statistics from Barnardo's, which revealed that the number of children needing foster care in Scotland has

increased by 50 per cent in the past year, were not mentioned.

I have a similar question. The programme for government for 2021-22 said that the Government was committed to introducing a national minimum allowance for foster and kinship carers, but no such policy has been introduced. That means that foster carers in Scotland live in the only part of the United Kingdom—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please ask a question.

Roz McCall: —where carers do not receive such a payment. When will the Government introduce that long-awaited national minimum allowance?

Clare Haughey: I think that I covered most of what Roz McCall has asked about in my response to Mr FitzPatrick. We appreciate that the Fostering Network has said that there is a shortage of almost 500 foster carers in Scotland, and we are working with stakeholders to explore ways to increase the number of people becoming foster carers. As part of that, we are willing to consider all options that have the potential to improve the lives of children with care experience, including the possibility of national and local remuneration.

South Lanarkshire College (Dismissal of Principal)

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assurances it has received that the correct procedures were used by the board of South Lanarkshire College when it took the decision to dismiss its principal. (S6O-01854)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Any decision on the employment status of a principal is a matter for the relevant college board. The Scottish Funding Council is assured, and has assured me, that due process has been followed in this case.

Graham Simpson: In fact, the college board did not follow the college's disciplinary procedures, which I have here. The principal, Aileen McKechnie, could not ask questions, call witnesses or challenge evidence and was not even shown any of the evidence against her. The outcome was a foregone conclusion, as I predicted. She was sacked, along with Brian Keegan, the clerk to the college board, who wrote the rule book on college governance and was then accused in a statement of having bullied Andy Kerr.

What really stinks is that there is no right of appeal. The college's disciplinary procedure says that sacked employees have the right to an appeal, which should happen without reasonable

delay and be dealt with impartially. Due process has not been followed, so the Government needs to step in.

The college branch of the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please ask a question.

Graham Simpson: Someone has lost their livelihood. The college branch of EIS-FELA has just had a vote of no confidence in the board—the second time that it has done so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ask a question, please.

Graham Simpson: What does the cabinet secretary intend to do? Given the facts, does she still have confidence in the board?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Funding Council has provided on-going assurance that the governance improvement plan, which has been agreed by the college board, is being implemented. The college is under strong leadership from the current interim principal and, with a new and effective board in place, it continues to function well.

The employment of a principal is a matter for the board, and it is important that that process continues. If Mr Simpson would like to write to me to make detailed points on the matter, I would be more than happy to take that up with the Funding Council, but I am content, and the Funding Council is content, that due process has been followed in this case. If any further action is to be taken, the Funding Council will, of course, support the regional board and the college board to facilitate that.

Graham Simpson: Disgraceful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Simpson, I asked at the start for brief questions. I have had to interrupt a number of members to get them to get to questions. I would discourage you from challenging the chair when the chair has asked you to pose a question. Thank you.

Schools (Bullying)

4. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle bullying in schools. (S6O-01855)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Bullying of any kind is unacceptable and must be addressed quickly and effectively. "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People", which is our national

guidance on anti-bullying, supports that. We expect schools and local authorities to use the national approach to recording and monitoring bullying incidents. Local monitoring allows schools to identify patterns, intervene early and provide appropriate support.

We continue to fully fund respectme, Scotland's anti-bullying service, to build confidence and capacity to address bullying effectively.

Education Scotland has completed a thematic inspection of the national approach. We will consider the findings and next steps carefully. We are committed to refreshing the national guidance on anti-bullying later this year.

Rachael Hamilton: The cabinet secretary is correct: bullying in Scottish schools is not acceptable. However, under the Scottish National Party Government, abuse of teachers in our schools has spiralled out of control, with almost 75,000 recorded attacks on school staff since 2017. In my constituency in the Borders, teacher and staff abuse in schools has increased by 355 per cent since 2017. Staff absences for mental health reasons have almost doubled. The correlation is clear. Can the cabinet secretary, having presided over such appalling levels of abuse, provide the Parliament with a plan to fix this problem, which the Government has created?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: When we look at bullying, harassment or any violence and intimidation in our schools, whether that is towards pupils or staff, it is very important that we work together to find a solution. The Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools provides advice and guidance to ministers on improving relationships. That is where we work together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, representatives from local authorities and professional associations to ensure that we provide evidenced advice and guidance in order to get that right.

I would be more than happy to meet Ms Hamilton if she has particular suggestions about what policies need to change, because I think that we all take this matter seriously. We are determined to keep it under review, as I said in my original answer. The group that I mentioned is the way that we can work together to do that, and I hope that we can work together across the chamber, too.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will have seen this morning's *Herald* exclusive that says that worried teachers have said that "toxic positivity" leads to bullying and fails pupils. A whistleblower who works in a secondary school in the east end of Glasgow comments on something called "pivotal behaviour

method", which is failing, in the words of this whistleblower,

"the 97 per cent of kids who are well behaved ... and doing well academically".

Will the cabinet secretary investigate the failings that are identified in the whistleblower's report?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I read the report in *The Herald* this morning. I reiterate that any form of violence is unacceptable. I am not going to comment on specific cases. It is up to schools and local authorities, as the employers, to decide what action should be taken in schools. However, as I said in my original answer, there is a national group that works with COSLA to look at the matter, and we will continue to work with our local authority colleagues and the professional associations to ensure that, if there are changes to be made, we take those decisions together.

Higher National Qualifications (Articulation)

5. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to further encourage articulation from college-based higher national qualifications to university-based degree programmes. (S6O-01856)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government recognises articulation from college to university as a key route into degree-level study, including for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The commission on widening access recognised the importance of expanding articulation and we are committed to implementing its recommendations in full.

Since then, we have invested in additional places for students progressing from college to university. We continue to work collaboratively on articulation with the college and university sectors and the Scottish Funding Council, for example through Colleges Scotland's joint articulation group.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the cabinet secretary for her reply. Does she agree that the progress that Scottish universities are making on fair access is significantly helped by colleges providing higher national courses that articulate with degree programmes? Does she agree that there is therefore every reason to further support colleges and encourage universities to develop more articulation arrangements?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I certainly agree with Michelle Thomson on that. It is a very important way that we can widen access to higher education. Articulation from college is a key route to degree-level study. As I said, many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds will take that route and, of course, learners can also study for

degrees in colleges that are affiliated with a university.

We are keen to see further progress on that and, in particular, on full articulation and recognition of the work that goes on within our colleges, to allow students to articulate to a university with the full recognition of such study.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Meghan Gallacher, briefly.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): At present, a key issue in colleges is the inability to properly assess completion rates. When the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training attended the Education, Children and Young People Committee in November, he was questioned by several MSPs about what he is doing to resolve the issue, and when it would be fixed. Mr Hepburn said:

“My ambition is to do it as soon as possible”.—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 2 November 2022; c 17.]

It has been three months since then, so will the Government provide an update on what progress has been made? If no substantial progress has been made, why not?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am happy to ask Mr Hepburn, who is not able to attend portfolio question time today, to go through that in detail with the member. She has raised a very important issue so, if she will allow, we will get back to her in writing.

Tertiary Education (Monitoring of Commitments)

6. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what monitoring is undertaken to ensure that any commitments made to tertiary education are delivered. (S6O-01857)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government monitors delivery through the normal processes that are set up by our tertiary education delivery arms, such as the Scottish Funding Council, the Student Awards Agency Scotland and Skills Development Scotland.

Every year, ministers issue a letter of guidance to public bodies setting out priorities in line with the programme for government. In turn, the Scottish Funding Council has yearly outcome agreements with colleges and universities, which set out what individual institutions will deliver. The Scottish Funding Council tracks delivery against those outcomes and regularly publishes various progress and statistical reports on its website. In addition, ministers and officials regularly engage

with those organisations to monitor the delivery of key commitments.

Michael Marra: I am principally concerned with what the Government is delivering to those institutions. They still await any conclusion to the critical coherence review; a raft of actions under the 2017 student finance report; the production of multi-year spending plans, which were committed to back in 2021; a replacement scheme for Erasmus, which was promised at the election; replacement metrics for widening access, which have been on the desk since 2014, when Shirley-Anne Somerville held the post of minister for universities and colleges; and the international education strategy, which is years overdue. I could go on, but I will not.

Ministers' failure to deliver such basic policy work is holding back the sector. Is the problem a lack of capability, a lack of energy or a lack of interest?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government is delivering both for colleges and for universities. That is demonstrated in the budget, the debate on which will follow portfolio question time, with additional funding going to our colleges and universities.

The Government was, of course, elected to deliver on a number of commitments during this parliamentary session, and we absolutely have the firm intention of doing so.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary set out how the Scottish Government is supporting our tertiary sector?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my answer to Michael Marra, one of the important ways in which we are doing that is by providing funding to colleges and universities. The net college sector resource budget will increase by £26 million and the universities budget will increase by £20 million. That is important and significant, and the Government has undertaken to do that under very difficult financial constraints this year.

Pupil Support Assistants (Recruitment)

7. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to increase the recruitment of pupil support assistants, including ensuring that they receive fair pay. (S6O-01858)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Local councils are responsible for the recruitment and deployment of their staff.

During the pandemic, the Scottish Government provided an additional £240 million to local authorities to support the recruitment of additional

teachers and support staff. We have since committed further permanent funding of £145.5 million a year to support education staffing.

Pay for local government workers, including pupil support assistants, is a matter for councils. Despite that, the Scottish Government recognises the crucial role that council staff play in our communities, which is why we supported local government with an additional £260.6 million to enable them to successfully agree a pay deal for 2022-23.

Foysoyl Choudhury: Yesterday, it was reported that councillors in Edinburgh will be asked to approve a £2.4 million cut to teaching assistant posts. In an industry that is already struggling with the retention and recruitment of staff, that news is deeply concerning.

Can the cabinet secretary tell us what action will be taken to protect pupil support and classroom assistants' jobs, given the vital role that they play in children's educational and social development?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Clearly, councils have not yet taken those decisions. Those are proposals by officers at this point, but I point to the national work that the Government has undertaken, which has been well publicised, around teachers, and our determination to ensure that we recognise and protect the role of classroom assistants.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary set out the Scottish Government's commitment to increase classroom assistant numbers?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am firmly of the view that we will not improve Scottish education by having fewer teachers or, indeed, fewer classroom assistants in our schools. Our commitment remains to increase the number of teachers by 3,500 and the number of classroom assistants by 500 by the end of this parliamentary session. We continue to provide local authorities with £145.5 million of annual funding to support that investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 is from Pauline McNeill, who joins us remotely.

Gender-based Violence (Higher Education)

8. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent meetings it has had with Universities Scotland to discuss gender-based violence in higher education. (S6O-01859)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government engages frequently with Universities Scotland on a range of student wellbeing issues, including gender-based violence. For example,

Universities Scotland is represented on the equally safe in colleges and universities core leadership group, which is chaired by the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training. The group meets on a quarterly basis and it met most recently on 16 November 2022.

Pauline McNeill: In December last year, the University of Glasgow published a report on the university's staff and student procedures and support arrangements in relation to gender-based violence, which found that there had been a significant increase in reports of gender-based violence by undergraduates in the previous 18 months. Morag Ross KC, who led the review, highlighted serious problems in the university's processes for handling incidents. One survivor said that when she went to the student newspaper, the *Glasgow Guardian*, she was threatened that if she took her case to the press she would be removed from her degree course. I am sure that the cabinet secretary agrees that, if that is true, it is wrong, but does the Scottish Government agree that Scottish universities need to make their sexual misconduct processes open and transparent to ensure that students have full confidence when reporting gender-based violence?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is absolutely critical in all workplaces or places of education that both students and staff feel supported to report an incident, and supported once they have reported it. The Scottish Government funds the EmilyTest charity to ensure that universities and colleges are not only taking the matter seriously but acting on it. I recently wrote to all the universities to encourage them strongly to join the EmilyTest charter, if they have not done so already. I reiterate that again today because Pauline McNeill raises an exceptionally important point: we need to ensure that the issue is tackled and that everyone feels safe in their workplaces and places of education.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): It should be common sense that under no circumstances should a rapist be allowed on a college or university campus, yet here I am again, for the second week in a row, raising the matter. Last week, I was discussing a rapist enrolled at a university; this week, it is a rapist enrolled on a college beauty course. That is appalling and unacceptable, not to mention dangerous. We need change, we need guidance and we need it now. Will the cabinet secretary ban suspected and convicted sex offenders from university and college campuses and will she issue national guidance?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The minister for further and higher education met the principal of

Ayrshire College on 30 January to clarify enrolment procedures and safeguarding measures in that college, given recent cases. That builds on the work that he is already leading, and previous conversations about concerns, to protect students if other students are subject to criminal investigation.

Scottish Government officials are working at pace with representatives from colleges and universities, as well as a range of stakeholders, with the aim of producing guidance to address those concerns. The first meeting of the working group, which has been arranged for 10 February, will include issues such as information sharing across institutions and with regard to people already in the justice system. That builds on discussions that the Scottish Government has had with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, Police Scotland, the College Development Network and Universities Scotland. I am also aware that the minister has met Ms Gosal to discuss the issue and he obviously remains happy to do so in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07727, in the name of John Swinney, on the Budget (Scotland) (No. 2) Bill. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:55

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The Scottish Government, like Governments all over the world, has been faced with a difficult set of choices in setting its budget. As I indicated to Parliament when I addressed the budget settlement in December, the volatile financial environment, including record levels of inflation and a cost of living crisis, have combined to create an exceptionally difficult fiscal landscape. The International Monetary Fund's report on Tuesday reflects that and indicates that the United Kingdom is predicted to be the only major economy that will shrink this year.

Against that very challenging backdrop, we have taken decisive action to deliver a meaningful and progressive budget for the year ahead that delivers for the people of Scotland. With the powers that are available to us, we have chosen to commit substantial resources to prioritise support for families and the most vulnerable, invest in our public services and support businesses through these difficult days.

A central tenet of the budget is that we have asked the people of Scotland to contribute a fair share of their taxable income—and in the case of higher earners, to pay slightly more than they have in the past—to help to create a fairer society in which we all want to live and where we can enjoy a range of benefits that are not available throughout the United Kingdom. Whether that is free prescriptions, tuition fees, personal care or concessionary travel, the people of Scotland have access to a social contract with the Government that delivers so much more to each and every person who chooses to live in Scotland. Together with our partners in the Scottish Green Party, we are working to create a progressive path for Scotland.

The 2023-24 Scottish budget supports an ambitious path for Scotland that focuses on eradicating child poverty, transforming the economy to deliver a just transition to net zero and providing sustainable public services for the people of our country. The Government leads by example in the bold steps that it is taking to address poverty in Scotland. That is demonstrated

through our social security system, which has been developed with dignity, fairness and respect at its heart.

We are committing £442 million in the year ahead to our unique Scottish child payment, which is the most ambitious child poverty reduction measure in the UK. I am proud that the Government has not only delivered the child payment but has expedited its increase, early and above inflation, to £25 per week per eligible child from November 2022. That is an increase of 150 per cent in eight months, and it is providing practical support to families who are most affected by the cost crisis. Indeed, the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that around 387,000 children could benefit from the Scottish child payment in 2023-24.

The Scottish Government recognises that the burden of high inflation is felt most by households that are on the lowest incomes, which is why we are uprating all remaining Scottish benefits by 10.1 per cent from April 2023. We have also gone beyond the energy support that is being provided by the UK Government to provide £20 million for the fuel insecurity fund to help households that are at risk of disconnection, and are continuing that funding into 2023-24, as energy prices continue to bite.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Deputy First Minister mentioned the Scottish Fiscal Commission. He must be concerned about its projections that, over the next 50 years, the Scottish economy will lag behind the United Kingdom economy. What plans does he have in the budget to try to deal with that problem?

John Swinney: There are two things that I would say to Mr Rennie. The first is that the Scottish Fiscal Commission's projections about tax indicate a strengthening of the income tax base in Scotland, which is a reflection of the strengthening of the economy that the Fiscal Commission expects. The second thing is that the contents of the national strategy on economic transformation, with its focus on entrepreneurship and on the development of strong regional economies, form a foundation for the economic strategy that will deliver for the people of Scotland. Mr Rennie is right to raise the issues of economic performance, because they lie at the heart of being able to generate the revenues to create the fair society that I have talked about.

Next year, we will support our investment in ensuring that children get the best start in life by investing around £1 billion in high-quality early learning and childcare provision, with a further £42 million to be invested in holiday food provision and expanding our support for school-age childcare.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): From the chancellor's autumn statement, we know that about £200 million extra for the next two years will be coming to Scotland in the form of Barnett consequentials for education, but, in this budget, less than an additional £100 million is going into education. Where is the other £100 million that does not appear in the budget for education?

John Swinney: I think that that demonstrates a spectacular level of ignorance on the part of Stephen Kerr. Is Mr Kerr unaware that education in Scotland is fundamentally delivered by local authorities, which have seen a £550 million increase in their budget, in addition to the extra money for colleges and universities that the education secretary just put on the record? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Kerr is shouting at me, "Where's the £100 million?". Local government budgets have gone up by £550 million and they deliver education in Scotland and the budgets for colleges and universities are up—*[Interruption.]* Would Mr Kerr please keep up with the budget, and then we might make some more progress? *[Interruption.]*

Scotland is built on the foundation of our public services. For those reasons, the Government has prioritised investment in the national health service and I am delighted that we are in the position to provide an increase of more than £1 billion to the health service in Scotland. That will provide more than £13 billion for NHS health and social care services, supporting NHS boards to continue to drive forward our five-year recovery plan.

We are delivering £1.7 billion of improvements for social care and integration as we prepare for the introduction of the national care service, and we will support the delivery of the £10.90 real living wage for adult social care with an additional £100 million.

Investment in local services continues to be a priority and we have reconfirmed our commitment to working with local government, recognising the importance of collaboration, partnership and accountability in delivering high-quality and person-centred public services. The budget provides more than £13.2 billion for local government in Scotland, which is an increase of more than £570 million for essential public services that are delivered by councils.

We will also invest almost £3.4 billion across the justice system in 2023-24, including an additional £80 million for the Scottish Police Authority.

As we look to a more sustainable, greener future in Scotland, our ambitions to deliver economic growth must be achieved through delivering a just transition to net zero. More than a decade ago, the Government led the way with its inspiring climate change targets. As we now work

to deliver a net zero future, the Scottish Government will continue to lead the way by investing more than £4.6 billion in our net zero, energy and transport portfolio. That includes more than £1.4 billion to maintain, improve and decarbonise Scotland's rail network, ensuring that that critical infrastructure continues to serve the needs of the people of Scotland.

We have provided substantial funding to help households face the cost of living crisis. Next year's budget will continue with that and we will spend more than £366 million across our heat in buildings and fuel poverty budgets.

Protecting Scotland's natural environment continues to be a priority and we will spend almost £467 million on restoring our peatlands, expanding Scotland's forests and tackling the causes of climate change and biodiversity loss, which will all contribute to the achievement of the net zero ambitions.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have just come from an event with the rail unions that was well attended by MSPs and was about getting the right investment in rail. The union representatives told us that the Government said last March that there would be a national conversation on rail, but no date has been set. How can we ensure that we get the right investment when we are not even having the conversation?

John Swinney: I am pretty sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport and other ministers are regularly engaged in the discussion about rail, but we will reflect on the comments that Monica Lennon has put on the record because she is right to say that it is important that our rail network and infrastructure meet the needs of those who require to use them. That is why we are pleased to bring forward our proposals on peak rail fares, which should remove some of the disincentives to the full utilisation of our rail network.

The Scottish Government is committed to sustained investment to support businesses and our economy, which is why we are providing the Scottish National Investment Bank with an additional £244 million to continue its investment in Scottish businesses, projects and communities. Over the next five years, we will invest £42 million to boost entrepreneurship by supporting start-ups in Scotland through our national network of tech-scalers and pre-scalers—that will be one of the most significant investments that the Scottish Government will make in that regard.

Of course, as we manage the transition to net zero, we must ensure that communities are well supported, which is why we are investing £50

million in the just transition fund for the north-east and for Scotland.

In the course of the pre-budget dialogue, businesses asked me to freeze the business rates poundage, and the Government has been able to do that. It is expected that that will save ratepayers £308 million in the forthcoming year, which, combined with the transitional reliefs that will be applied to the forthcoming revaluation and the continuation of the small business bonus scheme, will remove 100,000 properties from business rates altogether. That ensures that Scotland has the lowest poundage in the UK for the fifth year in a row and supports a package of reliefs worth an estimated £744 million.

This budget delivers the priorities of a progressive Government. It provides us with an opportunity to demonstrate how we can collaborate successfully as a Parliament, in the most difficult of times, to deliver the best outcomes to the people of Scotland.

I believe that this budget represents a fair and ambitious package, and I urge all members across the chamber to support it.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No. 2) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Gibson to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

15:07

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): A key theme of the Finance and Public Administration Committee's report on the Scottish Budget 2023-24 is the need for the Scottish Government to strike a better balance between responding to immediate pressures and undertaking long-term strategic financial planning. It is understandable, given the current economic climate, that ministers are focused on the here and now. However, the committee believes that more attention is now needed to ensure Scotland's financial sustainability.

The immediate challenges of high inflation and interest rates, the cost of living crisis and on-going demands for improved public sector pay offers will persist into 2023-24. Only today, we saw interest rates rise to 4 per cent, and interest payments on UK Government debt are already an eye-watering £115 billion a year. To put that in perspective, that is more than five times Scotland's public sector wage bill.

The chaos of the short-lived Truss Government and the economic policies that Tory MSPs such as Murdo Fraser and Stephen Kerr urged us to emulate led directly to the imposition of £55 billion

in tax increases and spending cuts amidst rocketing inflation. As a result, households across the UK will endure an average fall in living standards of 7.1 per cent over the next two years—the biggest fall in living standards since Scottish records began in 1998, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I may have misunderstood, but is Mr Gibson speaking on behalf of his committee or on his own behalf? The comments that he has made in his speech so far lead me to believe that the latter is the case, not the former.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: My understanding is that Mr Gibson is speaking on behalf of the committee.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you, Presiding Officer—

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Could Mr Gibson therefore clarify whether all members of his committee would sign up to the comments that he has just made?

Kenneth Gibson: I have to say that most of them probably would, to be honest, in terms of the comments that have been made regarding the fall in living standards of 7.1 per cent. I know that Liz Smith, who is sitting next to Mr Fraser—and who may also intervene if she wishes—was not a great supporter of the policies that were imposed by Mrs Truss, which Mr Fraser was so keen on us adopting in this Parliament.

I shall move on.

Balancing the books this year will be a herculean feat given that, in early January, the Deputy First Minister's budget was £200 million to £500 million short. An update on that in winding up would help. That shortfall adds to the 2023-24 budget pressures. In addition, the Scottish Fiscal Commission expects resource funding to increase by only £279 million in real terms compared with the latest funding position for 2022-23. That assumes inflation at 3.2 per cent using the Treasury gross domestic product deflator, but the reality is much different, given that inflation under the consumer prices index exceeds 10 per cent. A week ago today, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

“After taking account of in-year funding”

one-off

“top-ups”

that will be unavailable next year,

“funding will *fall* by 1.6% in real terms”,

even after the GDP deflator is used. Tough times lie ahead.

Following the UK Government's real-terms cut to the capital budget of 9.8 per cent last year, the budget for 2023-24 includes a further real-terms cut of £185 million from the UK, even after the GDP deflator is used. However, construction inflation is at more than 14 per cent. The Deputy First Minister confirmed that Scottish ministers cannot now fund all the projects that were planned as part of the capital spending review. The committee therefore asked the Scottish Government which projects will be deprioritised and how the fall in capital spend will impact on the Government's ability to achieve its net zero ambitions and the delivery of national outcomes.

Following the UK Government's November fiscal statement, the Scottish Government's resource spending review no longer provides the level of certainty or the clear planning scenario that was intended when it was published last May. With that significant change, public bodies must manage their finances and plan service delivery. We have asked for more clarity and certainty about resource spending to ensure that there is confidence in the sustainability of Scotland's public finances, so we seek an updated resource spending review as soon as possible.

Professor Anton Muscatelli said that this year's budget protects

“certain public services and welfare payments, so serious thought needs to be given to ensuring that growth can continue”—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 20 December 2022; c 3.]

to improve the economy's productivity and resilience in the medium to long term.

We often highlight the need to address Scotland's long-standing challenges of demography, productivity and growing the tax base. When the SFC publishes its first fiscal sustainability report in March, it will be a valuable contribution to how we meet those challenges. The Government's national strategy for economic transformation must be “pursued with vigour”. We have asked the Government how it is driving forward the strategy and how current financial constraints impact on its delivery.

The SFC forecasts that plans to increase the higher and top rates of income tax by 1p in 2023-24 raise revenues of £30 million on paper but, when behavioural change is factored in, that figure reduces to only £3 million. Such change is not so much from wealthy citizens switching their tax domicile from Scotland to England or even from incorporating to avoid tax; in fact, the SFC asserts that behavioural change is more to do with people deciding to work fewer hours rather than be taxed more. We saw that impact from tax changes for doctors, when Tory tax impositions from April 2014 of up to 55 per cent on doctors' pensions persuaded thousands to retire early. That was an

act of stupidity from which the NHS is still reeling. MSPs who think that imposing an additional income tax burden on the wealthy of, say, £1 billion will mean that an extra £1 billion is made available for public services are deluded.

Behavioural impacts are relevant to other devolved taxes, including the additional dwelling supplement, which was recently increased. We are keen to understand more about the drivers for behavioural change and have asked, as a starting point, for Scottish ministers to work with HM Revenue and Customs and Revenue Scotland to ensure that more data is captured on the behavioural impacts of tax changes.

In spending, social security alone is forecast to cost £5.25 billion in 2023-24, which is to grow to £7.25 billion in 2027-28. The gap between that expenditure and the block grant adjustment is projected to almost double—from £776 million to £1.4 billion by 2027-28—as Scottish ministers work to realise their ambition of reducing child poverty. Resources for that will have to be found from other spending areas. Health and social care expenditure will grow by £1.1177 billion, and there is £102 million more for our railways and £81 million more for the Scottish Police Authority. There is uncertainty about how much might be needed to fund increased pay, which is a major issue across all portfolios.

The resource spending review identified as key priorities digitalisation, innovation, reform of the estate and public body landscape, and public procurement. The Scottish Government committed to reporting the initial outcomes of its public service reform programme in the 2023-24 budget and to setting out proposals for the future of the public body landscape. We seek assurances that the Scottish Government remains committed to those aims.

The Auditor General said:

“There has never been a more important time to consider prioritisation in public services and productivity-enhancing reforms in the public sector.”

We seek a clear and detailed response on how ministers plan to achieve each reform priority, with milestones for delivering each of them, along with anticipated costs, efficiencies and savings. We will scrutinise how public bodies are working towards reform, as well as the support that they are receiving from the Government to do so.

The draft budget for 2023-24 has no details on whether the resource spending review targets for public sector pay and head count remain and, if so, how they might be achieved. A breakdown of areas where head count reductions will be made, and in what timescales, would be helpful.

The committee acknowledges the significant challenges ahead and urges Scottish ministers to

undertake more strategic long-term financial planning to ensure future fiscal sustainability, including on public service reform and social security commitments. For our part, the committee looks forward to considering an updated resource spending review, the Scottish Government’s public service reform programme and a new public sector pay policy in due course.

Lastly, I must comment on potential bids for increased spending from the Opposition. Every year—and it seems that this year will be no different—members loudly demand additional expenditure across portfolios. In recent weeks, Annie Wells called for additional non-domestic rates support, which would cost £85 million, Douglas Lumsden sought more unspecified resources for local government, and only yesterday Donald Cameron asked for additional indeterminate funding for the creative sector. Alternatives are fine, but members and parties that demand national funding lack any credibility whatsoever unless they can explain how much they want and where that additional funding should come from.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It is very clear that this cannot possibly be the speech of a convener of a committee of this Parliament, because it cannot have been written by a clerk who is employed by the Scottish Parliament. Therefore, this speech of eight minutes, which is, in effect, a second Government speech, is completely out of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I can hear you from this distance. First, in response to your previous point of order, I have already said that my understanding is that this is a speech on behalf of the committee. Secondly, Mr Gibson has clarified that position for the record. Thirdly, if there are any outstanding questions, that is a matter for the committee to pursue.

Mr Gibson, please conclude your speech.

Kenneth Gibson: I have just a slight bit to finish off. Thank you very much for your indulgence, Presiding Officer. This is a mild speech in comparison with my stage 1 speech last year.

Committee members across the party divide expressed concerns that witnesses to the committee, let alone other political parties, did not give funded alternatives, so we are on solid ground with that point. Alternatives are fine, but members and parties that demand additional funding lack any credibility whatsoever unless they can explain how much they want and where that additional funding should come from. I am not overly confident that that will change today, but I live in hope. Clearly, I have touched a raw nerve with Mr Kerr.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I want to check the timing of speeches, because that speech went well over the allocated time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am well aware of the time, Ms Gallacher. At this point, there is some time in hand, and when a member takes an intervention, for example, that is duly noted by the chair. That will be the case for other front-bench speakers as well.

I call Liz Smith to speak for around seven minutes.

15:18

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Last week, I gave great praise for the objectivity and straightforwardness of Kenneth Gibson's leadership of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Presiding Officer, I think that I will have to seek to correct the record. *[Laughter.]*

In the budget debate last week, I thought that John Swinney was uncharacteristically rather unkind, because he warned that he was going to pay far more attention to what Opposition spokesmen had to say on that occasion than he would today, as we set out our political stalls. I am well used to Mr Swinney's brand of humour, but I thought that that was a rather odd remark for him to make, given that he is always jumping up and down, urging Opposition members to outline their alternative choices for the budget—which, of course, is exactly what stage 1 is all about.

I will begin on a few points of consensus. I acknowledge that the backdrop to the budget is the most challenging on record. There is global inflationary fallout from the war in Ukraine and there are supply chain issues and energy costs. We have the Covid situation, which has still not gone away, although it is hopefully getting better, and labour markets are having to adapt to the post-Brexit and post-Covid landscapes. Also, of course, there is the fallout from the significant changes to fiscal policy that were made in the autumn by the UK Government.

None of those issues has been within the cabinet secretary's control, so we appreciate the predicament in which he has found himself. He says that budgets must be established on the basis of sound public finance. That is true, but budgets are also about choices, and it is there where we differ from John Swinney. Let me explain why that is, by what evidence we feel our arguments are supported and how we would allocate our rather scarce resources.

At last week's business breakfast, the Scottish Fiscal Commission set out its usual very objective

analysis—I hope that Mr Gibson agrees with that—by showing us exactly where we are with the Scottish economy right now. It was more optimistic about earnings growth and short-run tax revenues, but warned that when the nominal £1.7 billion of additions to the budget are drilled down into with inflation accounted for, the real-terms effect is much more like £279 million.

However, the greatest concerns remain that the Scottish economy has, for quite some time, been underperforming—and is forecast to continue to underperform—against the UK economy, and that the demographic issues relating to a diminishing working-population percentage are still having a major impact on productivity and on overall tax revenues for the future.

John Swinney: I agree very much with Liz Smith about the significance of the population issue and the working-age population. Earlier in her remarks, she mentioned the labour-market implications of Brexit. Does she therefore agree that one of the implications of Brexit has been a reduction in the eligible working-age population? The Scottish Government will do all that we can to boost employability, but does Liz Smith agree that the strategic impact of a measure that has undermined population growth in Scotland is undoubtedly a factor that will undermine economic growth in the forthcoming period?

Liz Smith: I say to the cabinet secretary that other countries that have not been through Brexit are not having quite the same problems. I come back to the point again—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Swinney is going on about growth; I am just coming to that point, because it is most important. I agree on some of the aspects that he has talked about, but I will focus on the growth point, which is extremely important.

Mr Swinney always likes to blame Westminster for the ills in the Scottish economy but, as I said in my response to the budget statement on 15 December, I think that that is disingenuous. The structural weaknesses—this is where the growth point is important—in the Scottish economy are not related to Westminster but to the choices that have been made right here in Scotland during all the time that the Scottish National Party has been in power.

To blame Westminster is also disingenuous because Mr Swinney has had more money from the UK Government than he has been prepared to admit.

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

Liz Smith: I will not, if the member does not mind.

I remind Mr Swinney of the comments in the middle of December from the Fraser of Allander Institute, which I know Mr Swinney respects. It said that the block grant money from the UK Government has “more or less” covered the inflationary pressures on him.

Mr Swinney has said on more than one occasion that there is a “moral argument” for paying more tax because it allows the Government to fund free prescriptions, increased child payments and free tuition fees. The trouble is that the public does not see its higher tax burden delivering far better public services, whether in health, education, transport, policing or housing. At present, all that the public see is cuts, especially in local government, and a stand-off between Nicola Sturgeon and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the lack of flexibility when it comes to council spend, particularly on teacher numbers.

Mr Swinney knows only too well that Scots are cumulatively paying more than £1 billion extra a year, but because there is slower growth here, that is raising just £325 million extra for public services. In addition, the higher tax-rate differentials create disincentives. I am, I regret, well aware from looking at the books that there is not enough money available just now to remove all the income-tax differentials that currently exist, which is what we would like to do.

However, the additional tax on over half a million Scots is due to raise £95 million, which is less than 0.2 per cent of the Scottish budget. That makes a tax rise very much a political choice of the Scottish National Party, rather than one that helps the economy.

So, what has to be done differently? Let me begin with the Scottish Government’s proposal for a national care service. The minimum estimate of its cost, albeit that it is from a seriously flawed financial memorandum, was £1.3 billion over a five-year period. The best estimate of the cost now, albeit that it is from a flawed financial memorandum, is that it will be £95 million for the coming financial year. Would not that money be far better positioned with local governments, which are very much on the front line of delivering health and social care services? The compelling evidence from stakeholders before three committees in Parliament has been that they do not believe that the national care service is workable. I have heard John Swinney virtually admit that. I think that the money would be better spent on local governments, because they are absolutely at their wits’ end about where the extra money will come from, and it is having huge implications for their plans for the future.

We also know that, over the years, the cumulative Barnett consequentials in health and in

education have not been fully passed on to the local authorities, as we had originally expected.

I turn to businesses, especially the small businesses in our retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. We welcomed the announcement that the Scottish Government is freezing non-domestic business rates, but we also note that, as a result of various measures that have been announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce the rates burden on businesses, there will be £222 million of Barnett consequentials, which could well go towards a 75 per cent rates relief package. We do not have to remind the cabinet secretary of just how important our business sector is.

We welcome the £20 million that has been transferred from indyref 2 to additional fuel payments, but we question why as much as £35 million is designated for the external affairs budget. It is absolutely right to fund international development and humanitarian aid, but we have an issue with the SNP’s spending on various aspects of external engagement that could be done by the United Kingdom Government.

Budgets are all about choices. I do not doubt that the choices are extremely tough, given the limited resources that are available. However, we on this side of the chamber do not believe that the SNP’s priorities are in line with the priorities of the people of Scotland.

15:27

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I think that right now everyone in Scotland is asking themselves two fundamental questions. First, they ask, “Can I afford to get ill? I don’t know when an ambulance will turn up to take me to hospital or if there will be a bed for me when I get there.” Secondly, they ask, “If it has been a struggle to pay bills this year, what will it be like next year, once UK Government help is withdrawn?”

The budget needed to provide the answers to those two big questions, but it does not. The budget has no new plans, no new solutions and no new answers to those big problems. These are challenging times.

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: I will give way in just a moment.

Inflation has eroded the spending power of Government. However, challenging times require decisive actions, and this budget simply does not offer such actions.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Johnson for giving way so early in his speech. I just want to be clear about the line of argument that he has

begun. Is Mr Johnson saying that, should the United Kingdom Government, which has proper responsibility for management of the energy market, fail to deliver support for paying the outrageous energy bills that members of the public are facing, the Scottish Government should use its resources to support such an endeavour? That is exactly what he has just put on the record.

Daniel Johnson: Let me be very clear. There is an overarching need to help people to lower their reliance on gas. I am talking about mitigations so that people can make their homes more energy efficient, yet what this Government wants to do is repeat a scheme that it cut in September because it was not working due to a lack of demand. How on earth did the Government manage to devise a scheme for energy efficiency and insulation, fuelled by utility bills during a cost of living crisis, but find a lack of demand? The Government wants plaudits for repeating the very budget line that it cut in September last year. It is nonsense.

More of the same—which is all that the budget is offering—will not fix the delayed discharge crisis. Repeating policies that were cut will not help energy bills, and leaving local councils with a £600 million shortfall will not fix a single pothole, reopen a single library, pay for a single extra social worker or help our kids to learn.

Ultimately, the so-called national care service sums up everything that is wrong with this budget and this Government. It is a plan that assumes that centralisation will solve everything. It is a plan that is losing the support of those who work in the sector and those who need the sector, and it is a plan that will cost billions but will not add a single penny to the front line. It is a budget that is so lacking in transparency that it does not even specify how much it contains for that plan.

For the people who actually deliver care, the budget offers just 40p an hour extra—even less than the 50p an hour they got last year. That is a 3.8 per cent rise, when others in the health sector are being offered 7.5 per cent and inflation is running at more than 10 per cent. It just does not make sense. We all know that the front door of the NHS is jammed because the back door is broken. Why? It is because we cannot recruit care workers to deliver care packages, which means that people who are well cannot go home.

Payment of £12 an hour is not just a budget call—it is a budget imperative to save the NHS. Let us be clear: £12 an hour is affordable. According to the Scottish Parliament information centre, creating a £12 an hour floor for adult social care workers would cost £150 million. According to the Government's own figures that it used in 2021, the amount would be £200 million. That money can be found. The Government could reallocate the £100 million in the miscellaneous line item in

the central NHS budget. It could save £100 million by reducing delayed discharges, and it could pause the national care service, which would save £95 million in the coming year. That is where £12 an hour can be found. It is affordable, but the Government chooses to pursue a ministerial power grab instead of doing what would be right, which would be to pay social care workers a fair wage.

Ross Greer: Mr Johnson suggested deleting the miscellaneous line item in the NHS budget. Can he tell us what that would result in cuts to? What services are in that line item?

Daniel Johnson: The fact that Ross Greer does not know that shows the lack of transparency in the budget—[*Interruption.*] Let us have the discussion. There is a wider context here, because there are 300,000 people in the public sector earning less than £15 an hour. The Government cannot and should not build public services that are based on low pay. A budget that does not even have a public sector pay policy, let alone a workforce plan, is, frankly, deficient.

The budget damages local services. SNP council leaders are clear: the £600 million shortfall will cause them to consider 8,000 job losses. They also point out that the claim that there are additional funds is bogus, because the money is all so ring fenced that it is forcing finance directors to consider whether councils can continue to afford to deliver statutory services.

The reality is this: it is not a single budget or a single budget line that has caused the situation, but 15 years of underfunding—15 years of decisions from the SNP to cut front-line services. The absurdity of that is that those service cuts impact health, learning, poverty, transport, employment and inequality, which will ultimately cost this Government more.

Stephen Kerr: On that point—

Daniel Johnson: I am afraid that I do not have time to take another intervention.

Labour would deal with that structural problem by scrapping the council tax and non-domestic rates and replacing them with fairer and more progressive levies. The Scottish Trades Union Congress estimates that that could raise as much as £450 million. However, instead of a plan for local government, all we have is vague promises of a concordat mark 2.

We live in challenging times. Resources are tight, but challenging times require decisive action and a clear plan. However, there is no plan from this Government to deal with NHS crisis, no plan to secure the vital services that are delivered by local government, and no plan to help people to manage their bills. Just like the Government, the

budget provides nothing new and no new answers to the challenges that people up and down Scotland face. Its priorities are wrong, which is why Scottish Labour will vote against the budget.

15:34

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We have approached this budget in good faith, and we are ready to support it if it is right—not perfect, perhaps, but good enough. After all, we reached an agreement in the heat of the pre-election period before the last Scottish Parliament election to show that we were prepared to cross the constitutional divide because, at that stage, the budget was good enough—in particular, we secured an extra £120 million for mental health. I hope that the Deputy First Minister agrees that my party leader, Alex Cole-Hamilton, has engaged constructively in the budget process so far.

I accept that this is a more difficult environment, which has been compounded by the actions of a Conservative Government in utter chaos. We should be able to agree that innocent people should not be left to pick up the bill for the Conservative Government's wrecking of the economy, including in this week's desperate economic news that the UK will lag behind even Russia in its performance this year. That should sink in and terrify us—so much for the great Brexit bonus that was promised.

We will continue to make the case at Westminster for the investment that should come to the various regions and nations of the United Kingdom. One needs only to look at today's report of the Shell profits—unprecedented in UK company history—to see why we need a proper windfall tax. We have also told the Deputy First Minister where we think money could come from to make the investments that I will set out in my contribution.

It is worth dwelling on the performance of the Scottish economy. The Scottish Fiscal Commission believes that the Scottish Government might be losing out on almost £700 million of income tax revenue because of weaker economic growth. It has also projected that Scotland's economy will grow more slowly than even that of the UK over the next 50 years. That is staggering and should be sobering, too, for this Parliament. We need to do something dramatically different from what we have been doing, particularly over the past 15 years.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Would the member accept that some of that has perhaps to do with a flawed fiscal framework?

Willie Rennie: Always reaching for the idea of flawed frameworks and flawed relationships with the United Kingdom will not deal with the

fundamentals of the Scottish economy. I am afraid that the business community has a perception that the Scottish Government is not interested in it. That needs to change if we are to use the skills and talents of the people of this country to invest in our economic growth. We will continue to lag behind if we reach for constitutional grievances every time. Therefore, I reject what Mr Mason has said. There might, of course, be flaws in the fiscal framework, but they are not the reason why we have lagged behind for the past 15 years and are projected to lag behind for the next 50 years.

It is the same with productivity. The Productivity Institute said that Scotland's productivity "has been very weak" over the past decade and trails behind that of similar foreign countries. That sets the context for this budget.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Will the member give way on that point?

Willie Rennie: I would have loved to do so if I had had more time, but I have only six minutes.

The Liz Truss budget was reckless, of course, and Brexit has, without doubt, damaged our economy and made us poorer. However, the Scottish Government, too, has a tremendous responsibility for turning these matters around. The slower growth and poorer productivity in Scotland affect our income, and that needs to change.

Let me set out our costed proposals. The first is for the NHS. When the NHS recovery plan was launched, one in five children was waiting too long for mental health treatment; from one in five, it has now become one in three. Young people are battling the long shadow of lockdown and the rising cost of living. So, we are opposed to the freezing of the mental health budget at £290 million in cash terms, which will also be substantially eroded by inflation. That freeze comes on top of the £38 million cut from the mental health budget this year, which was announced on 2 November last year. I am disappointed, too, that the Scottish Government is ending its excellent work on providing mental health counsellors for students at universities and, especially, colleges. I hope that the Scottish Government reflects on that, because young people have suffered greatly through the pandemic and we should not cut support for them at this time.

We also want more money for people who are suffering from long Covid, which Alex Cole-Hamilton has referred to repeatedly. An extra £20 million would triple the size of the Scottish Government's existing commitment. The 158-page draft budget was completely silent on that. We need action on mental health and long Covid,

which would help the fundamental problems that the whole NHS is facing.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the Scottish Government has understated the real-terms cut to councils once existing pay awards and ring fencing are taken into account. Even the SNP president of COSLA, Shona Morrison, says that it is a bad deal. Not unreasonably, the Scottish Government challenges members in the chamber when we ask for more investment in certain areas: we have to spell out where it will come from. That is not unreasonable, as I said, and that is why we have a costed plan. The Scottish Government is telling local authorities that they should not cut teacher numbers, but I think that it is equally incumbent on Scottish ministers to tell local government where it should get the money from. If the approach is good enough for us, it should be good enough for the Government.

I hope that the Government acts responsibly through the budget process, that it is fair to local authorities and that it provides them with the money that they need to pay for the teachers to get the recovery in our education system that it desperately needs. If the Government does all those things, we will look seriously at the budget at stage 3. We want to act constructively. This country needs a Government that is working for people. So far, I am doubtful as to whether the budget will meet that requirement, but we are prepared to look at and vote for it if the Government does the right thing.

15:41

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): We face a whole range of issues as we go into the 2023-24 budget. The economy has taken a massive hit because of Covid, and a range of sectors—especially health—need financial and human resources to get on top of things again. On top of that, there is the war in Ukraine, with its impact on food, energy and steel production, and the impact of inflation both here and around the world. It is worth noting that, however difficult we, in Scotland, find our situation, many other countries, including our partners in Malawi, are finding things much more difficult.

I want to say a little on another major challenge, which I hinted at earlier: the fiscal framework. I know that we signed up to it fairly voluntarily, although, if I remember correctly, the Conservatives wanted us to agree to a previous version that was even more disadvantageous for Scotland.

The framework is to be reviewed, which is welcome. In retrospect, we can see that we are not in a fair fight, because so much depends on how our economy fares in comparison with that of

the rest of the UK, which, in practice, means how we do against London and the south-east. Even before the union, in 1707, Scotland found it difficult to compete with England and, in particular, with London, and the union has tended only to re-emphasise that challenge. Ireland has shown that it can be done, by leaving the UK and developing its economy in a different way. However, that is not an option for us in the next couple of years. In the meantime, we have to adhere to the UK's economic, taxation and immigration rules.

Liz Smith: I do not disagree with some of the things that Mr Mason has said. Nonetheless, does he accept that the Scottish Government signed up to the current fiscal framework in 2016?

John Mason: I think that I said that. I was on the Finance Committee at that time, and we all looked at it and thought that it was a better deal than we had been offered previously. However, in retrospect, we now find that there are some disadvantages to it, which I do not think any of us foresaw.

We are expected to outperform England if the block grant adjustments are to work in our favour. The odds are stacked against us and the fiscal framework needs to change. The UK either has to make it more advantageous for us to remain in the union or more and more people in Scotland will come to the conclusion that the present set-up does not work for any of us. There is clearly no union dividend.

Turning to the detail of our budget, we need to maximise the resources that are available to us, and I very much welcome the various measures to increase tax, including 1p more on income tax for people who are better off and an increase of 2 per cent on the current additional dwelling supplement for people who buy a second home either for their own use or to let. I hope that that will be a boost for first-time buyers, too.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Does the member agree that the additional dwelling supplement being charged for local authorities is the wrong way to do it and that that should be addressed by the Government as soon as possible?

John Mason: I think that the Government has made a commitment to review that because, in one sense, that money is going round in a circle—it is public money that is staying in the public pot. To an extent, I accept Douglas Lumsden's point.

We should also remember the point that was made by Professor Anton Muscatelli and the expert panel, which was that, although our income taxes are fairly progressive compared with those of the UK and beyond, our property taxes are not as progressive, yet they are devolved.

I realise that it takes time to make major changes in taxes, but, at some point, we need to grasp the thistle, look at changes to council tax and consider having wider property taxes and possibly wealth taxes.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

John Mason: I think not, as I have given way twice already—unless the Presiding Officer is giving me a lot of extra time.

The most recent council tax valuation took place in 1991. I understand that, since then, house prices have gone up by more in richer areas than they have in poorer areas, so people in richer areas are paying comparatively less council tax than they probably should be, and, relatively speaking, people in poorer areas are paying too much. Councils will decide by how much they need to put up council tax this coming year, but the system has to change, and—from my perspective and, I believe, that of many people in my constituency—the sooner, the better.

Whatever resources we manage to bring in, we still need to make difficult choices about how we spend. The idea that we come to the budget and just present a list of demands is unrealistic and has the effect of misleading the public as to what is possible. Therefore, I was slightly disappointed when, in last Thursday's debate, the subject of colleges came up and I asked the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee whether they would recommend a reduction in university funding so that more money could be given to colleges but she declined to comment.

On Monday, I was at the launch of a report on the City of Glasgow College, and I can assure members that the principal, Paul Little, answered that question. According to him, that college receives £10,000 for a student to get a degree, whereas, across the road, the University of Strathclyde gets £30,000 for a student to get a degree. Although I did not investigate his figures, and I suspect that there are some nuances to that, the point remains. I hope that, when the Education, Children and Young People Committee looks at colleges and their funding, it not only asks for more funding for colleges but looks at whether the balance between funding for colleges and funding for universities is right.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP) rose—

John Mason: I am sorry, but I am not giving way to Mr Doris.

I think that the Finance and Public Administration Committee would be keen for other committees to work on the issue of priorities within portfolios. Rather than just saying that colleges and universities need more money, it would be

helpful if the committee came back to the Government and said, for example, that colleges should get more and universities less, or vice versa.

I accept that that would require a degree of courage from committees—

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I am sorry, but I have taken two already and I think that I need to wind up. *[Interruption.]* Well, if it is a point of order—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but the member should really start to conclude now.

John Mason: Yes, I think that it is just Mr Kerr who misuses points of order.

I will end by mentioning local government. Primarily, the debate is about how much cash local government should get. We face hard choices between the NHS and local councils. Colleagues in Glasgow have suggested that there be less ring fencing and more flexibility, and that councils be allowed to increase penalty charges by more.

I commend the budget to the chamber and I hope that we can all support it.

15:48

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): As a former council leader, I well remember the yearly merry-go-round of budget negotiations with the Government. Letters would fly back and forth, and meetings would be demanded and sometimes even granted. The Greens would demand more money for local government, and the pantomime would close with money being found down the back of the Derek Mackay sofa.

Unfortunately, we no longer have that pantomime. The Greens' slavish devotion has been bought for the price of a couple of gas-guzzling ministerial cars. It is shameful. Despite the SNP-Green devolved Government having the largest core grant since devolution, it is local government, yet again, that will have to provide more essential services for less.

I have long argued that the only way to deal with some of the key issues in our communities is to deal with the problems at the grass roots and to fund community projects, which leads to much less funding being required further down the line.

A prime example of that is our men's shed network, the funding for which accounts for a tiny amount in the scale of the budget, but which has proven to massively reduce health and social care costs further down the line. By investing in small

community projects, we can address many issues such as loneliness, ill health and social isolation in a personal and local way, but the Government is slashing the budget for the men's shed network. It talks about early intervention and prevention, but that is all talk and warm words without action. I challenge the Government to put its money where its mouth is and to correctly fund men's health organisations.

The reduction in funding for our councils and the likely increase in the cost of our teachers, along with much-needed additional money to pay for social care staff, mean that services in our communities will be cut. The money has to come from somewhere. If it does not come from Government, it has to come from the roads, parks, refuse collection, leisure and education budgets.

Bob Doris: Daniel Johnson was very honest about how he would find more money for councils. He would rob £100 million from Scotland's NHS. Where would Douglas Lumsden get the money from?

Douglas Lumsden: I am not sure that Daniel Johnson did say that. I am not going to defend Daniel Johnson, but Liz Smith has already set out where additional funding for local government would come from, and I will come to that too.

For many years, councils have been asking for a fair funding settlement so that they can continue to meet the needs of our communities. The Government has continually squeezed those budgets to breaking point. The COSLA finance spokesperson, who is a member of the SNP, said that, in recent years, local authorities had faced

"extremely difficult financial choices due to real terms cuts"

and wider economic pressures. She added that

"There is a real danger that, as well as cuts, some essential services may stop altogether."

To have essential services stopping altogether is quite a legacy for the SNP-Green coalition.

There is a different way. Given that the national care service appears to be dead in the water due to key unions withdrawing from the process and ministerial back-peddalling, perhaps the £1.3 billion that has been earmarked for that can be diverted to the bodies that are currently struggling to deliver social care—our local councils. Continuing to pour money into a dead-duck policy that no one thinks is a good idea, given the current financial pressures on our social care providers, is a disgrace and the SNP-Green devolved Government needs to wake up to that reality. There is a crisis in delivery and care that has happened on their watch.

Ross Greer: Will the member accept an intervention?

Douglas Lumsden: My apologies—I am struggling for time.

I turn to the impact that the budget will have on business. The Fraser of Allander Institute has described the budget as taking a "hardline approach" to business, with

"No additional reliefs ... being applied to hospitality and retail, as is the case south of the border."

The devolved Government has further cut £66.4 million in cash terms from the cities, investment, strategy and regeneration budgets. That is vital funding that drives growth in cities such as Aberdeen.

Last week, I spoke about the impact that the budget will have on growth: zero. It is a short-term budget with short-term goals. There is no financial planning or growth planning. It is a budget that lacks ambition from a Government that has run out of ideas.

It is the public that pays the price for that lack of ambition or solutions, not only in the demise of our services but in their pockets, because we have higher taxation than in the rest of the UK. Middle-income earners, such as teachers and healthcare workers, will be hit by increased taxation while the rising cost of living is also hitting them hard. The Government is making life more difficult for hard-working families in Scotland.

Although the tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK sees Scottish taxpayers paying £1 billion more in tax each year, that adds only £325 million to our public services. That is a result of slower growth in earnings and employment. Without growth, increased taxation becomes meaningless. Without ambition, growth is impossible.

As my colleague Liz Smith pointed out, services are not improving. In fact, they are getting worse. More and more people see their bins being collected only once a month; police numbers are falling; the attainment gap is not improving; NHS waiting times are increasing; the number of social care staff is falling; the drug deaths figure is not improving; growth is stalling and our high streets are closing. The list goes on and on.

The Government has more money to spend and more opportunities than ever before, but it has run out of ideas. The budget is short-sighted and short term. It is damaging to Scotland's economy and to the pockets of hard-working Scots, it will see services cut and higher taxation for many of our constituents, and it does nothing to deal with the problems that this Government has created and has failed to address. It will harm growth, business and hard-working Scots, who will be left picking up the bill for this failed Government.

15:55

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Context is key in politics and in any political decision that is made, particularly at budget time. An article in the *Financial Times* on 31 January said:

“The IMF consigned Britain to the economic doghouse on Tuesday. As the only leading economy likely to contract this year, the UK’s growth forecasts were revised down by the fund at the same time as it boosted those of most other countries.

Even Russia is expected to grow more than the UK in 2023, in the fund’s outlook.”

The longer-term problem about capital expenditure and productivity growth persists. UK productivity growth rates dropped more than those in other countries after the 2008-09 financial crisis.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I will not at this stage. I want to make some progress.

Business investment has not grown since the 2016 Brexit referendum. The Tories talk about business growth, but Scottish Government modelling shows that Scotland’s economy and social wellbeing have been disproportionately impacted by Brexit, with Scotland’s GDP set to be £9 billion lower in 2016 cash terms by 2030—which represents a 6.1 per cent cut—compared with the position under continued EU membership, yet Labour and the Tories still support Brexit and want to “make it work”.

Why does all of that matter? Along with high inflation, low growth impacts on our Scottish economy and its ability to raise taxes.

Denmark tops the International Institute for Management Development’s seventh annual world digital competitiveness ranking, which is an assessment of 63 countries’ capacity and readiness to adopt and explore digital technologies as a key driver for economic transformation in business. While the UK lags in 14th place, small, independent Denmark, which has all the powers over its economic levers, came first. I will return to that later.

Families, businesses and our public finances—

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: Yes. I will take it at this stage.

Douglas Lumsden: I thank the member for taking the intervention. He talks about more powers. Why does the Scottish Government not use the powers that it has?

Paul McLennan: It does. I will touch on other powers that we should have but do not have within the devolved set-up.

Families, businesses and our public finances are under sustained economic pressure and the Scottish Government has acted decisively to provide what support it can within its limited resources. The budget focuses on steps that we can take now that will help to ensure that Scotland emerges from the current crisis a stronger, fairer and greener country.

The Scottish Government would of course like to go even further, but the cost of living crisis has laid bare the fiscal constraints of devolution. The Scottish Government has proposed changes to a number of devolved taxes that will raise additional revenue to support our NHS and other public services.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I have already taken an intervention.

The finance secretary has set out plans to add 1p to the higher and top tax rates, maintain the starter and basic rates at their current levels and reduce the threshold above which people pay the top rate from £150,000 to £125,140. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, that will raise £129 million. The maintenance of the higher rate threshold at its current level will generate a further £390 million.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that the tax decisions that have been made in Scotland since income tax powers were devolved could raise around £1 billion more in 2023-24 compared with the income tax policy decisions made by the UK Government. I support the approach. Of course those who are able to contribute more to society should do so.

I want to focus on child poverty. The Deputy First Minister mentioned the investment of £442 million this year. The briefing from the Child Poverty Action Group states:

“We welcome the prioritisation of child poverty in this budget. Prioritising investment to reduce inequality and eradicate child poverty is absolutely the right thing to do. We know that this investment is working.

Our Cost of a Child in Scotland report analyses the difference the commitments that have already been made will make to families in Scotland.”

It goes on to say that the investment in the Scottish child payment and other low-income benefits, free school meals, free bus travel, funded childcare and reducing the costs of the school day are all having welcome impacts on low-income households.

Scotland is the only part of the UK that has introduced a child payment. The Scottish child payment has now been increased to £25, which represents a 150 per cent increase in eight

months. It has also been extended to under-16s, which is estimated to lift 50,000 children out of poverty.

Of course the Scottish Government would like to do more, which takes me back to the financial constraints of devolution. The Scottish Government cannot borrow to support day-to-day expenditure when times are hard in order to assist us through these difficult days.

Sue Webber: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I will not. I have taken two interventions.

John Mason touched on the fact that fiscal framework discussions are taking place with the UK Government. The UK Government has to give more fiscal flexibility, including additional borrowing powers, particularly over social security and housing, which are demand-led services. Labour MSPs should support that.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I am just about ready to conclude.

That takes me on to my final and fundamental point, which is about where powers lie—what the Parliament cannot and can influence.

We cannot control the UK's having runaway inflation, which impacts on our budget not only this year but next year and affects every person in Scotland. We cannot control how much profit energy companies make and what their contribution is to tackling fuel poverty. Recently, Shell announced profits of £68.1 billion for 2022—a 53 per cent increase—due to soaring oil prices, despite the fact that many people cannot afford to eat or heat.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: No, as I am about to conclude.

We know that Tories will always cosy up to corporate giants. Just imagine that the powers to introduce a windfall tax lay in this Parliament—yet neither Scottish Labour nor the Lib Dems will support giving power to the Parliament to deal with a windfall tax. Why not? What is the logic?

I welcome the Scottish budget proposals, but we need full powers over all economic levers to ensure a fairer, prosperous and greener Scotland.

16:00

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Generally, a stage 1 debate is about the principles

of a bill. Although the annual budget bill is slightly different, we should still be able to have an open debate about priorities and the strategic direction in which the Government plans, through its budget, to take the country.

However, that has been almost impossible. The smoke and mirrors, the political spin and, at points, the verging-on-dishonest presentation of the figures and their impact mean that we cannot have such a debate with the Government, because its response is just to deny reality.

The Scottish Government talks about the changes to its budget in real terms but, in the same breath, talks about the changes to the local government budget in cash terms. The Government talks about increases to local government budgets but does not bother to mention that the extra funding is already set aside for new commitments.

Stephen Kerr: Given the way that the Deputy First Minister handled my intervention about the £100 million, does Mark Griffin share my concern that, because of the situation that he has outlined, that sum will not be in addition to local authorities' current education budgets?

Mark Griffin: Absolutely. The Government asks us to come to the table and have an honest discussion about where we would spend additional funding and where we would cut, but, until we have the transparency of an honest starting point, that is impossible for anyone in the Labour Party without the support of the Government and civil servants.

We have seen it year on year. The Government announces extra funding—it is a trick of so-called extra funding. It announces with fanfare a new and welcome policy. I will give the example of the 1,140 hours of nursery provision: a warmly welcome policy that is hugely important in getting working parents back into the economy through supporting kids with extra early learning and childcare. The funding is announced, is allocated in year 1, is then combined with the general grant and is never updated with inflation. The Government gets the plaudits and councils are left with the need to squeeze other areas of the budget in order to maintain that commitment. Alternatively, as we have seen recently, they are threatened with legislation to keep it going.

It is not good enough for the Government to come to the chamber and talk about shared priorities and shared commitments. If those are shared commitments, there must, surely, be a shared commitment to pay for increases in costs year on year, rather than leaving the burden with local government.

We also cannot have an honest debate with the Government on ring fencing, given that the

Government maintains that just 7 per cent of a local authority's budget is ring fenced by relying on a strict legal argument, although there are billions of pounds more in directed spending, over which councils have no control. The Government's recent announcement of legislation, in response to Glasgow City Council considering cutting its teacher numbers, shows that that 7 per cent figure was always just spin.

In addition, what does the impact on councils of that announcement say to other council staff? Is it that the Government cares only about teachers and that teachers are the only jobs in local government that are worth protecting? My five-year-old daughter can tell you that the janitor, the catering staff, the cleansing staff, the bus driver and the school crossing patroller are just as much a part of her education as teachers. However, it seems that they are not worth protecting because the Government seems to value only teachers when it comes to education. Now, all those extra staff, who do just as much work and work just as hard to support my daughter's education, will take a bigger hit as a result of the budget. I am sure that they will hear the message of the Government's priorities loud and clear.

The Government talks about the huge cuts to the housing budget, which is appalling in the year in which we have just seen the highest homelessness figures since records began. It talks about that huge cut as just "reprofiling" of the £3.5 billion that it planned to spend anyway. That is taking us and the public for absolute fools. Given that inflation is at the highest level that it has been for years and that inflation in the construction industry was already running out of control before general inflation caught up, it is clear that spending the bulk of that funding further down the line means that it will be worth less. Fewer houses will be built and fewer people who are experiencing homelessness will find a home, and that will all be because the Government wants to pretend that a budget cut is not a cut. Shelter and SPICe tell us that it is a cut; the Government says that it is "reprofiling". I know who I will be listening to.

When the cabinet secretary announced his budget, I asked him some questions. What are the costs to the health service of raiding budgets? What happens when people cannot access a local authority's preventative services because they simply no longer exist as a result of cuts? I have not had an answer, and councils have not had an answer. What does that do to our NHS? All of that amounts to cuts, and someone will have to pay the bill. Given the preventative nature of spending on communities and housing, we know that it will be the NHS and ordinary people who will pay that price.

16:06

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): A budget debate is not my usual métier, but the principles of budgets are not a mystery. With an individual's domestic budget, income needs to be balanced against expenditure, or borrowing will be required. The Scottish Government's budget is no different, except that its income is, in the main, set by the UK and we have no borrowing powers for revenue.

Likewise, an individual's budget has first to prioritise payments for necessities such as mortgages, rent, utilities and so on. Then, as inflation erodes the value of that income and costs rise, choices about savings or cuts have to be made. For some folk, the choice is now quite simply between food bills and energy bills. It is much the same for the Scottish Government. It has responsibility for billions of pounds, but the principles remain the same.

The necessities of government are the responsibilities that we all know about: delivering public services, including health, social care, education, the justice system and policing, and providing funding to local authorities. In most cases, some 80 per cent of what is provided is fixed in nature. For example, in health and social care, there are fixed costs associated with hospitals, all the staff, their salaries and pensions, ambulances, medical treatments and so on. That might seem obvious to us in Parliament, but many people do not understand that cutting into one budget and moving money to another would, if it were to have any substantial effect, perhaps mean cutting into staffing levels, for example.

The biggest slice of the Scottish budget rightly goes to health and social care, which accounts for nearly 33 per cent of the total. I do not think that we would argue with that being a priority. The next large chunk—almost 20 per cent—goes to local authorities via COSLA, which then divvies up the money to councils under an agreed formula that takes into account, inter alia, demographics, population, rurality and so on. The Scottish Government does not negotiate separately with each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland. I say that to start with in order to put the budget choices in context.

In my many years in Parliament, I have never known such pressures, which are felt across the UK, on Government budgets. In more than a decade of Tory Government, austerity—indeed, stagnation—was inbuilt. That was tolerable while interest rates and inflation were low and borrowing was cheap, but the UK economy was fragile. We can factor in the years of Covid, the war in Ukraine, Brexit and four Chancellors of the Exchequer in one year. We have a rudderless

shambles of a UK Government that has no clear or consistent idea of how to manage the UK economy—otherwise, why were there four chancellors in 2022?

We have ended up where we are today, with general inflation at 10 per cent and food inflation reckoned to be nearer 15 per cent, while energy companies swim in unearned profits of billions of pounds. The Scottish Government, which is almost wholly dependent on the UK for its budget and is dealing with inflation of at least 10 per cent and pay demands to match, is firefighting as it has never had to do before.

Murdo Fraser: Does Christine Grahame accept the Fraser of Allander Institute's analysis that the Scottish Government's budget for the coming year has been more or less protected against inflation by the increase in the block grant from Westminster?

Christine Grahame: I will address that by quoting from the Finance and Public Administration Committee's report—I do not know whether Mr Fraser is on that committee. In its preamble, the report says:

"It is clear from our scrutiny of the Scottish Budget 2023-24 that the Scottish Government is firefighting on a number of fronts."

No wonder there is little opportunity for long-term planning. The problem is not only that so many costs in individual portfolio budgets are fixed but that there are horrendous pressures on those budgets.

I welcome progressive policies such as free travel for all under-22s and over-60s, as well as for people with certain disabilities and their carers; no tuition fees; free prescriptions; free school meals for pupils in primaries 1 to 5, with the proposal to extend that to all primary pupils; the baby box; and the Scottish child payment. Those policies prioritise families and children, who are Scotland's future.

Incidentally, the Deputy First Minister referred to the small business bonus scheme, under which some businesses pay no rates whatsoever. That came into the Scottish Government's budget after negotiations with the then Conservative finance spokesperson Derek Brownlee, who was a big loss to the Parliament. That Tory group supported the budget and amended it so that the scheme would be included in it. Those were the days when the Tories did not just oppose for opposition's sake.

Other financial commitments will be needed to mitigate harsh Westminster policies and underfunding. No one pays the bedroom tax, which is imposed by Westminster, but that costs the Scottish Government £70 million. This year, £20 million has been allocated to the fuel

insecurity fund. Those are just some examples of the millions of pounds that are spent to mitigate Tory austerity. However, there are limits. The Scottish Government has perhaps been a victim of its own success over the years, as we tend to take those mitigations for granted.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I am in my last minute.

I have listened with interest to the contributions so far. Opposition members always fail to say how much proposals will cost on a recurring basis and from which existing budget the money will come. Neither is there essential recognition of the devastating impact of inflation.

I will go back to where I started. Every household in Scotland, including the dogs in the street, knows that its money is not going as far as it did before. Savings are having to be made. Choices are having to be made—shrinking back to the basics: rent, mortgage payments, heating bills and food. The Scottish Government is no different, just as it is no different for the domestic budgets of Wales and, indeed, England.

16:13

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): As has been noted a number of times in the debate and in the Finance and Public Administration Committee meeting last week, this is by far the most difficult context yet in which a Scottish Government has had to set an annual budget.

At this point last year, inflation was running at around 2 per cent. The UK Government had cut the Scottish block grant by just over 5 per cent in real terms, and we were rightly describing that budget-setting process as the most challenging that the Parliament had ever faced. However, since then, a combination of the continuing damage from Brexit, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the spectacular disaster of Liz Truss and long-term Tory mismanagement of the economy have created a set of circumstances that are much worse than what at that point was—we hoped—our worst-case scenario.

Despite the challenges that are outwith our control, this is the greenest budget ever. Scrapping peak-time rail fares from September will save travellers hundreds of pounds and will end what the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen—ASLEF—has correctly labelled a tax on commuters.

In addition, 20,000 more children will be eligible for free school meals and £80 million will be invested in expanding school catering facilities, so that eligibility can be expanded to even more children as soon as possible.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Tomorrow afternoon I will take part in a cross-party briefing from Jim Logue and North Lanarkshire Council, which has a projected £67 million budget deficit. What am I going to tell them about the difference that the Green element of the SNP-Green Government is making? This Government is doing exactly the same as previous SNP Governments have done, which is cut services and cut local jobs. What is the Government asking councils to do? Have they to wait for a de facto referendum before anything changes, because it is carrying on just as it was before? Where is Ross Greer's wealth tax now?

Ross Greer: That is a bold comment from a Labour Party that, about 20 minutes ago, proposed cutting £100 million from the NHS without even knowing what that £100 million was for.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I was referring to Mr Johnson, so I will take an intervention from him.

Daniel Johnson: Does Ross Greer acknowledge that that money would be redirected within the health budget because it would go to social care?

Ross Greer: Of course Mr Johnson proposed that the £100 million would go towards increasing the wages of social care workers, which is something that everybody in the Greens and the SNP wants, I am sure. The issue is that Mr Johnson does not know what he would be taking that money from. That would be a cut to healthcare services—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Greer.

Ross Greer: The Labour Party has proposed that cut, but it does not know what it is actually proposing to cut. That is just comically irresponsible.

What we are delivering in the budget is funded in part by the most progressive tax system in the UK. By raising the higher and additional rates of income tax and the additional dwelling supplement, the highest earners and people who are buying holiday homes and extra properties will pay a bit more to fund the public services that are so desperately needed during the cost of living crisis.

Scotland has extremely limited devolved taxation and revenue-raising powers, but although we certainly need more financial powers it would be wrong just to make that argument without making the best use of the powers that we have. Therefore, in 2018, the Greens worked with the Scottish Government to deliver progressive

changes to income tax. We lowered the tax that was being paid by the lowest-paid workers and increased it for people on higher incomes. Those progressive changes have raised hundreds of millions of pounds for public services.

However, given the monumental pressure that the Scottish budget is now under, and given the need for high-quality public services during the economic crisis, we need to go further. We might be in a cost of living crisis—one that is pushing many households towards crisis point—but there are plenty of high-income and wealthy people in this country who can afford to pay a bit more. Those who are on the highest incomes can afford an extra penny on the tax rate that is paid on the top slice of their salary, and people who are able to buy a second home or holiday home can absolutely afford—

Liz Smith: Does Ross Greer nonetheless accept the comments from many people in business and industry—in particular, groups such as the Confederation of British Industry—that Scotland is desperate for more well-paid jobs?

Ross Greer: Of course we are desperate for more well-paid jobs, including for the purpose of raising additional tax revenue. However, as we see from the SFC forecast for income tax over the next couple of years, the fact that Scotland has a more progressive income tax regime than the rest of the UK has clearly not had any detrimental effect on our ability to raise income tax revenue.

As I said, this is a budget that we are proud of, because it will see people on the higher and top rates of income tax and those who pay the additional dwelling supplement paying a bit more.

Between those rate changes and freezing of income tax thresholds, about half a billion pounds more will be raised to support public services and to deliver vital additional interventions including free school meals expansion.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I have taken a number of interventions. I apologise to Mr Kerr.

I was intrigued by the point that Liz Smith made about the £95 million that will be raised from the income tax rate increase, because she identified it with the national care service spend and quite legitimately said that the Conservatives would not spend the money on that, because they would rather see that £95 million going to local government. Given that, I look forward to seeing the Conservatives vote for the rate resolution that will deliver that £95 million of additional funding for our public services.

As I said last week, fair pay for public sector workers is now one of the biggest challenges that the Scottish Government faces. To be absolutely

clear, I point out that the Greens believe that all workers—in the public, private and third sectors—deserve pay rises that are at least in line with inflation, and we support their right to take whatever industrial action they believe is necessary. However, with inflation rising above 10 per cent, a real-terms budget cut from the UK Government and extremely limited tax powers, it is impossible for the Scottish Government to deliver that level of pay increases in the short term without paying for it with devastating service cuts and job losses. It would cost about £2.5 billion.

That is why I think that the STUC and Unison proposals are so important and why I welcome Labour's commitment to reforming and replacing the council tax and the non-domestic rates system, perhaps with what is in the STUC and Unison papers. The last time council tax was in date was before I was born. We have an opportunity in this session of Parliament to deliver the kind of systematic structural change that should have been delivered a long time ago. I hope, from the contributions that Labour members have made this afternoon, that Labour will join the two parties in the Government that have already committed to doing that

16:19

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I want to focus my speech on the housing crisis and the homelessness emergency in Scotland. I could not believe that the finance secretary did not mention housing or homelessness once in his speech—he had more to say about peatland restoration than about the housing emergency that we face.

Figures that were released this week show that as at 30 September 2022, 28,944 open homelessness cases were recorded in Scotland, which is the highest figure since records began in 2002, and an 11 per cent rise on the previous year.

I am disappointed that the Deputy First Minister is leaving the chamber.

In a written answer to me on the time that children in Scotland are spending in temporary accommodation, I learned that Scottish Government data shows that 447 households that include children in their homelessness application have spent more than three years living in temporary accommodation. Let that sink in for a minute: under this Government, in Scotland today, children and their families are living in bedrooms in former guesthouses for three years or more. If that is the progressive pathway that the Deputy First Minister outlined, I want nothing to do with it.

Hundreds of Scotland's children are spending years in that sort of accommodation, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on their physical

and mental wellbeing. This Parliament should be doing something about that, but we are not.

The numbers are getting worse. In the past year, there has been a 10 per cent increase in the number of children living in such conditions. SNP and Green ministers cannot continue to fail to act, and making cuts to the housing budget is not going to help. Our young people are paying the price for the SNP-Green Government's inaction.

Last week, the Scottish Conservatives called on the Scottish Government to declare a housing emergency, but ministers failed to act. It is deeply concerning that the budget once again seeks to target the housing budget for significant cuts, at the very time when pressures on our housing system are increasing, especially here in the capital.

As Shelter Scotland says in the briefing that it issued ahead of today's debate:

"The Scottish Government often talks about living up to the preventative ambitions outlined in the Christie Commission, yet failing to adequately invest in social housing simply damages health and education, and will leave children trapped in temporary accommodation for longer periods of time and cost the government more in the long-term."

Michelle Thomson: We all recognise that there is massive pent-up demand and a chronic shortage of housing. Given that, will Miles Briggs support my calls for a massive increase in the capital borrowing powers of the Scottish Government for exactly that sort of project?

Miles Briggs: Michelle Thomson really should consider what she is about to vote for, because SNP and Green members will very soon be asked to vote to cut the housing budget by 16 per cent—£113 million. I am not sure how she thinks that will have a positive impact, but I would say that those members need to think twice about supporting the budget later today.

I agree with Michelle Thomson that increasing the supply of social housing in Scotland is crucial if we are to address the housing emergency. Developing new and sustainable tenancies with the housing sector is also critical if we are to deliver the tenancies that people who are homeless or are in a housing emergency need.

However, we are not seeing that happen. We need the Government to find solutions. That requires funding that is adequate to ensure that enough homes are delivered to reduce housing need and get people permanently out of temporary accommodation. Charities such as Shelter and Crisis that work day in and day out to end homelessness are clear about the impact of the cut to the housing budget; they say that it could derail the Scottish Government's ability to reduce housing need in this parliamentary session.

Just as with the drugs death crisis, SNP ministers do not seem to understand the growing need for direct emergency action to address the housing emergency in our country. I think that, in years to come, we will see them come to the chamber to acknowledge that, but I say today that this is when we should be taking action, not cutting budgets. The decision that has been taken by the SNP and the Greens to cut the affordable housing supply programme at the very time when we are seeing significant increases in homelessness is wrong, and the policies that have been pushed—especially by Green MSPs—in Parliament recently are also undermining the potential for the private rental market to address homelessness and deliver homes for people here in the capital and across Scotland.

As far back as January 2022, concerns were being raised here in Edinburgh with regard to the capital losing out on £9.3 million of homelessness funding due to a bureaucratic anomaly. I raised those issues with the cabinet secretary several times in Parliament, but no more action was taken to address that. More resources must be given to Scotland's cities. Glasgow and Edinburgh are at the epicentre of the homelessness crisis, so they need the necessary resources.

At the election, all parties pledged that we would work to end homelessness during this session of Parliament. After this week's shocking figures, that pledge looks unachievable without a totally new approach from the Scottish Government.

To conclude, I return to an issue that I have consistently raised in previous budget debates, but which ministers continue to fail to engage on or act to reform—the underfunding of the City of Edinburgh Council and of NHS Lothian. We receive the lowest level of funding per head of population for our council and our health board. That is driving many of the crises that my constituents face and a lack of opportunities to find solutions. Edinburgh deserves a fair funding deal, but it is clear that, after 16 years in office, the SNP Government is content to continue to short-change the communities that I represent. That is not fair and it must change.

16:25

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): This is another budget where the reality has fallen way short of the Government's rhetoric. The Deputy First Minister repeated today the claim that local government has an extra £550 million to spend, but he failed to say that he has ring fenced almost every single penny of that entirely for central Government commitments. As SNP-led COSLA has said, the actual increase is just £32.8 million, at a time when local government needs £612 million just to avoid more cuts, and that would not

return a penny of the £6 billion that has been stripped from local government in the past decade.

When he outlined the budget, the Deputy First Minister said—I welcomed it—that he wanted a new partnership with local government, an end to the fractious debates about resources and accountability for spending, and a more effective way of working. I wonder whether he has even read his own budget. It is clear that SNP councillors have. COSLA's resource spokesperson, Katie Hagmann, said:

“Council Services will now be at absolute breaking point and some may have to stop altogether.

This is a result of cuts to our Councils' core budgets”.

SNP councillor Shona Morrison, who is COSLA's president, said:

“The reality of the situation is that yet again, the essential services Councils deliver have not been prioritised by the Scottish Government.”

Just two days ago, the finance director of SNP-run Glasgow City Council told the Parliament that councils are on a knife edge and that this has been the worst year that they have ever had. There is no new way of working; it is the same old anti-council, anti-local services approach that we have seen for the past seven years.

As a direct result of the cumulative effect of budget after budget that SNP and Green MSPs have voted for, councillors of all political persuasions and none will, once again, have to wrestle with the painful choice of which of their community services to cut and which of their neighbours' jobs to axe as part of the 7,000 jobs that COSLA warns could be lost because of the budget. The debates that will take place in council chambers up and down Scotland in the next few weeks will be about not which local services to trim but which services to scrap altogether.

I recognise the difficult financial position that we find ourselves in, which has been made more difficult by the Government presiding over years of low growth. We need to focus what funding we have on how best we can protect services such as social care, deliver fair pay for workers and support people through the cost of living crisis. Those priorities are connected. We will not protect social care and the NHS without addressing the scandal of low pay in social care. A day rarely goes by when my inbox—like, I am sure, those of others—does not contain another heartbreaking case that exposes how utterly broken our care services are.

Today, a third of beds in Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary are occupied by patients whose discharge is delayed by a lack of carers. More than 3,000 hours of assessed care is not being covered because there are no carers to cover it.

Everybody except the Government knows that we will not recruit carers with the derisory 3.8 per cent pay rise that the Government is giving social care workers. The SNP and the Greens should listen to the calls for a delay to their unpopular, unworkable and uncosted national care service plan and instead use the funding for that to give our carers a pay rise, which would save money in the long term by reducing the bill for delayed discharge.

We need to better focus how we spend our budget not just in social care but in how we support people during the cost of living crisis, as their energy bills rise. It was shameful that the Deputy First Minister, with the Greens' support, cut this year's energy efficiency budget by £133 million, given the shameful level of fuel poverty in Scotland and given that properly insulating our homes cuts not only fuel bills but fuel use and therefore emissions. Last year, the Government's warm homes funding helped fewer people than it did in the year in which the scheme was launched. Only around half the funding that was allocated for energy efficiency schemes, which were administered by councils, was ultimately spent. The Government should tackle low uptake not by cutting the budget but by dealing with the reasons why the current, poorly designed schemes are not being utilised.

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): We all know that, when one particular budget is underspent, that money does not disappear—it goes back into other public services. However, does Colin Smyth acknowledge that, as a result of changes that we have made recently, Scotland now has, by far and away, the most generous and flexible package of grants and loans—not only better than any other part of the UK, but much better than Scotland has ever had—and that the industry is stepping up and making sure that the capacity is there so that people can use those grants and loans?

Colin Smyth: There is no point in having schemes and grants if they are not actually being spent.

Patrick Harvie: They are being spent.

Colin Smyth: They are not being spent. The Government has just returned £133 million to the budget because those schemes were not actually allocating funding.

I know that, for this financial year, the minister has made some changes, which I welcome, but he knows perfectly well that organisations such as the Existing Homes Alliance want him to go a lot further. They want him to ease the restrictions that are still imposed on councils and other bodies for currently unworkable schemes. There needs to be more flexibility and owner contribution levels to

make those schemes affordable. We need to tackle the utter failure in Government workforce planning, to make sure that we have the trained workers to deliver the schemes under the new regimes that the Government has set. That also means providing more certainty on future funding, such as by writing to councils and setting out the minimum funding levels for future years. That will allow councils to plan longer-term projects and give supply chains a proper pipeline of work, which enables them to plan and invest. We cannot find ourselves in the same position next year, in which households are crying out for investment to keep their families warm but the Government is not able to spend funds that should be invested in rapidly insulating people's homes.

Scotland is facing dual crises, as the cost of living soars and as social care and the NHS face the greatest crisis in living memory.

The Presiding Officer: Michelle Thomson will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:31

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): This budget debate already feels like groundhog day. Unless Scotland gets many more meaningful economic powers and—ideally, from my perspective—independence, I confidently, albeit sadly, predict that my speech will be replicated in the coming years.

There is no prospect of the UK doing anything other than continuing to fall behind the economic performance of comparable states. We talked earlier about the IMF's damning verdict that the UK is predicted to be the only country facing a shrinking economy in the coming year. It is expected to be the worst-performing state economically among the G7 and G20, and it is predicted to perform worse than sanctions-hit Russia. I concede that those are uncertain predictions for the future, so let us look to the certainty of the past.

Over the past four decades, and particularly since the financial crash of 2008, data shows that UK economic growth has lagged behind the average for large and small advanced economies—especially over the past two decades, when the economic growth gap has widened. However, small, advanced economies of a similar size to Scotland experienced cumulative economic growth that was double that of the UK between 1999 and 2019. To put it another way, by 2019, the gap between the small economies' average output and the UK's output had grown to more than £12,700 per person.

That has real-world, practical consequences. For example, in the past few days, data from the UK Insolvency Service reveals that the annual

number of company insolvencies in the UK shot up in 2022 to more than 22,000, which was a rise of no less than 57 per cent and means that jobs, self-respect, livelihoods and ambitions have been destroyed. As Faisal Islam reported, that is exactly the sort of pattern that was predicted by those who opposed Brexit. However, Labour and the Tories are as one in accepting the Brexit debacle. They have become the handmaidens of Brexit and are intent on forcing the Scottish people to accept it regardless of the cost in jobs and services.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I traipsed round the streets to campaign against Brexit. Can Michelle Thomson explain why the SNP spent more on the Orkney by-election than it did on opposing Brexit in Scotland?

Michelle Thomson: I am sure that Jackie Baillie does not think that that is an excuse for standing idly by while exactly my point is made about the loss of jobs and services. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members. We will hear Ms Thomson.

Michelle Thomson: In this context, the efforts of the Deputy First Minister, acting as finance minister, in particular, should be applauded. As if being faced by the UK failures that I have just described is not enough, the devolution settlement ties his hands behind his back in multiple ways. I will outline two examples of that. I have spoken before about the severe restrictions placed on borrowing powers. First, if the Opposition parties were sincere in their concern about productivity, they would be actively supporting calls to give the Scottish Government the same freedom to borrow, particularly for capital projects, as that enjoyed by the Westminster Government. Secondly, if they were sincere in their concerns about the Scottish economy, they would be insisting on the transfer of all fiscal powers to Scotland.

Miles Briggs: The Scottish Government's budget documents price inflation for the building sector at 17 per cent, which I know the member is aware of. Why, therefore, is the capital investment budget being cut at a time when investments are most desperately needed?

Michelle Thomson: Mr Briggs needs to look at the wider context of the budget. My point is that, if we had greater powers—over cap ex, in particular—we could do a great deal more. Until Mr Briggs starts joining me in those calls, although he claims to be looking for more housing, his words are shallow—that is a fact.

We know that the unionist brigade will do nothing but deny Scotland the necessary powers to tackle the key challenges that we face. As I have said before in the chamber, and as recent reports from Transparency International, Open Democracy and authors such as Oliver Bullough

have evidenced, there is corruption at the heart of the UK Government and key institutions, leaving aside the individual records of recent Prime Ministers, chancellors, baronesses and goodness knows who else. Corruption destroys the potential effectiveness of markets and puts obstacles in the path of the many decent businesses that are seeking to survive, compete and progress.

The historic legacy of Labour and Tory actions of years past continues to haunt government, including local government in Scotland. In my patch, Falkirk Council has a £13 million obligation legacy from private finance initiatives, and that is not the only legacy that it faces. Commenting in 2016, Audit Scotland's best value audit report criticised previous Labour and Tory administrations for failing to grasp the nettle of major challenges and instead squandering money, which led directly to a deficit of £67 million.

In such circumstances, the Scottish Government—and the acting finance secretary, in particular—have faced huge challenges with imagination and with a clear commitment to the interests of the Scottish people.

I will conclude with an appeal to the finance secretary. In the midst of all the challenges, let us work to unleash the contribution of female entrepreneurs, who have faced historical disadvantages, including cultural ones. It is never enough to look only to Government when facing challenging times or new opportunities. We need to mobilise all our talents regardless of sex, race, age or other characteristics.

We, on these benches—

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Ms Thomson.

Michelle Thomson: We want to look forward and outwards. We have global ambitions. We are European.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Thomson.

Michelle Thomson: Stop the world—Scotland wants to get on.

16:38

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): As ever, the SNP presents a sleight-of-hand budget, in which its cuts are magically spun as generous settlements, particularly for those who are in local government, but, otherwise, it is always somebody else's fault. Welcome to the SNP's Alice in Wonderland approach to budget setting.

SNP members are keen to tell us that there is a fixed budget, but there are fiscal levers that the Government can pull, including on income tax and land and buildings transaction tax. Goodness, it

could even reform council tax, which was promised in 2007 but never delivered.

What people are seeing is their taxes going up but services being cut at the same time. The budget is about setting out priorities. Where are the measures for growing the economy, on which our future tax take will rely? Where are the measures to tackle the cost of living crisis and for investing in our public services?

The national performance framework sets out what the Government believes are the priorities, but it is interesting that there is no link with the budget. Spending more than £45 billion in revenue but not linking it to the delivery of its priorities is, frankly, absurd and out of step with almost every other country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Let me start with local government. COSLA said that it needed £1 billion to cope with the cost pressures for the year ahead. Instead, the non-ring-fenced money that it got amounted to around £32 million. Mark Griffin was absolutely right to point out that funding for new commitments does not help with core budgets. The consequence of this is libraries closing, teacher numbers being reduced, funding to repair our roads being slashed, and deep cuts across every local service. According to a leaked report from COSLA, almost 7,000 staff could lose their jobs. This is a centralising Government that has decided to sacrifice local democracy and services. It is criticised by its own SNP councillors but is deaf to their concerns.

Let me move on to health and social care, which are inextricably linked and must be equally valued. The Royal College of Nursing tells us that it wants to see in the budget fair pay for nursing staff and a focus on retention and reversing the growing number of vacancies, which is having an impact on patient safety. We agree. However, the words “social care worker” could be substituted for “nurses” and the same would apply. Poor pay leads to many social care workers leaving their jobs and taking ones in retail and hospitality, because there they get more money and less responsibility, and because the increasing number of vacancies makes it a challenge to ensure the safety of those cared for.

The crisis in health and social care cannot be resolved without addressing the scandal of low pay in social care, yet this budget offers little. The 40p pay uplift is an insult to staff. A social care worker is comparable to a band 3 nurse. Social care workers got 3.8 per cent; nurses got double that. The Scottish Women’s Budget Group was also very clear that care workers’ wages should be set at £12.50 in the short term, rising to £15 per hour—a move that Scottish Labour has repeatedly called for over three successive budgets.

The Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland also makes the point that more money for social care workers, who are a predominantly low-paid female workforce, means more spend in the local economy, but of course the Deputy First Minister stripped £50 million away from the fair work budget in his emergency budget, so he has shown where the SNP’s priorities lie.

The cost of increasing pay for adult social care is £150 million—that has been verified by SPICe. Daniel Johnson set out several budget lines from which that money could be drawn, resulting in more than would be required to meet the policy. The Government should take it from the national care service and take it from delayed discharge.

Ross Greer: Will Jackie Baillie take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: I have to say that it is a bit rich for Ross Greer to falsely claim that we were moving money out of the health and social care budget. I remind him that it was, after all, the Greens who promised £15 an hour to social care workers in their manifesto before the election but then sold out for the ministerial Mondeos instead.

The Deputy First Minister knows my view of the current framework bill for the national care service. Instead of a vision and an approach that delivers cultural change, we have expensive structural change that does not invest one single penny extra in a care package. It is nothing more than a national commissioning service, with no answers about what happens to the pensions of the 70,000 public sector workers who will be transferred in, or indeed the potential for an additional 20 per cent VAT cost to be imposed on the centralised service. COSLA is unhappy. Trade unions are unhappy. The voluntary sector is unhappy. People with lived experience are beginning to understand that this is the emperor’s new clothes.

The Government should pause the bill and listen to what the sector is telling it. It should use the money that that would release to fund social care. We all acknowledge that we are living through one of the worst cost of living crises in a generation. At a stroke, the SNP could end non-residential care charges. At a cost of £68 million, that would help the same older people and vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, in their local communities. It is in the SNP’s manifesto, and the Government can do it now and help some of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.

After 15 years of the SNP, its cuts to training places for nurses, its cuts to primary care, its reduction in the number of full-time equivalent general practitioners, and the cut of £1 billion by Nicola Sturgeon when she was health minister have all contributed to the crisis in health and social care. Scotland cannot afford to pay the price

of SNP mistakes any longer. Vote against the budget.

16:44

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

Early in the debate, we had a bizarre contribution from Kenneth Gibson, the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. I have been the convener of three committees in my time in this Parliament and I had always understood that the role of committee convener in a stage 1 debate was to speak on behalf of the committee and express the views in the committee report. It is not to be a partisan lapdog for the Scottish Government, which is what we heard from Mr Gibson during his speech. I hope, Presiding Officer, that if committee conveners being partisan is going to be the trend in future debates, you and the Parliamentary Bureau will reflect on the time that is available to committee conveners to speak in stage 1 debates.

Kenneth Gibson: Is the reason why the member and his colleague Mr Kerr are so upset the fact that people were reminded of the rather ridiculous comments that he and Mr Kerr made post-budget last September? If they had not been named, they would not have intervened. Last year, I was more partisan than I have been this year. If Mr Fraser had listened to my speech, he would have found that most of the criticism levied was about issues such as the lack of reform. It was a very balanced speech, but the reality is that it was Mr Fraser's ego and that of Mr Kerr that made them intervene.

Murdo Fraser: That was a second speech by the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Let me come to some of the points of substance that he raised. There was a theme on the SNP benches, and he seemed to suggest, that the economic challenges that are being faced in the United Kingdom are somehow unique to the United Kingdom. However, that is not the case. It is true that inflation is high, but inflation is coming down. Inflation is also high in Europe and is coming down. In fact, in November, UK inflation was lower than the EU average. In December, UK inflation was lower than in many other European countries.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No. I need to make this point.

It is true that, this morning, the Bank of England increased interest rates in the United Kingdom by 50 basis points. It is also true that, today, the European Central Bank increased interest rates by exactly the same level—50 basis points. It is also true that, yesterday, the Federal Reserve in the USA increased interest rates there. It is also true

that, today, interest rates in the United Kingdom are lower than they are in the USA and Canada. Maybe it is the case that Liz Truss is to blame for what is happening in the USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, France and the rest of Europe, but I think that that is somewhat unlikely.

Daniel Johnson: I am wondering how many of those countries withdrew hundreds of mortgage products in September, as happened after the mini-budget and Liz Truss's intervention.

Murdo Fraser: There are plenty of mortgage products available today. Mr Johnson needs to keep up with the news and see what is happening.

I turn to the overall size of the budget. I think that it is widely accepted that there was, in the current financial year, a record high block grant from the UK Government to the Scottish Government. For the year that is coming—the year that we are talking about—the Fraser of Allander Institute says that the block grant “more or less” protects the money going to the Scottish Government against inflation.

In historical terms, if we look back over the period of devolution, we see that the Scottish Government has more money to spend than in virtually every year previously and yet, at the same time, taxes are going up and services are being cut, thanks to the choices that the Scottish Government is making. We should never forget in all this that, in Scotland, we have more than £2,000 more than the UK average to spend for every man, woman and child in the country, thanks to the Barnett formula—the Barnett formula that the Scottish Government wants to get rid of. That is the union dividend that John Mason was looking for.

This is about choices. Liz Smith set out the approach that we would take that would be different. Starting with the national care service, we see that at least £1.3 billion is to be spent on that over the next five years. That is money that could be reallocated elsewhere. We could look at the constitution budget and the money that is being spent on civil servants preparing for another independence referendum that will not now take place. We could look at the money wasted on projects such as BiFab, Prestwick airport and the ferries.

However, there is a more fundamental point here. We know that, since 2014, the Scottish economy has grown at precisely half the UK average rate. If we could just match the rate of growth of the UK economy, we would have hundreds of millions of pounds extra in tax revenue to spend. That is a matter that the Scottish Government needs to pay attention to. That is not just a historical issue but one for the

future, as both Willie Rennie and Liz Smith have pointed out.

We set out our ask for this budget. We believe that the support for business that is available elsewhere in the UK—the 75 per cent rates relief for businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector—should be available in Scotland.

We believe, as Douglas Lumsden has pointed out, that the settlement that is being proposed for local government is unfair. Mr Swinney set out how he is giving councils more money, yet all that we hear from them is that they are having to cut services. Yesterday, I got a letter from the leader of Fife Council, Councillor David Ross, who expressed deep concern at the cuts in Fife Council, saying that

“despite identifying £22 million of savings for the coming year”,

the council is

“still facing another £11.5 million rising to £33 million next year and £54 million the year after.”

That situation is reflected across the country. Perth and Kinross Council, with which Mr Swinney is familiar, is looking at a funding gap of £26 million in the coming year. It is not just Labour or Conservative-led councils that have those concerns—SNP council leaders have exactly the same ones.

The local government settlement will lead to cuts in services and hikes in council tax. We will see school crossing patrollers go; we will see the scrapping of breakfast clubs and educational psychologists, the closing of libraries and the cutting back of the cultural offer. We do not know yet what will happen to teachers, because we are waiting to hear whether teacher numbers will be protected. Mark Griffin made the really good point that, even if teachers are protected, that will come at the expense of classroom assistants, janitors, catering staff and all the other people who work in education, which will be to the net detriment of our young people.

At the outset, John Swinney said that he was going to take “a progressive path”. We now know what that progressive path looks like: despite having more money to spend than ever before, John Swinney is hiking taxes, including income tax and council tax, and at the same time cutting vital services for people across Scotland. That is what this budget delivers and that is why we need to vote against it.

16:52

John Swinney: In his speech to Parliament this afternoon, the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee asked me to provide an update on the current financial year and the

degree to which I am wrestling with securing a path to balance. For completeness, I say to the convener that, at this stage—a very advanced stage—of the financial year, I am still wrestling with an estimated overspend of approximately £100 million. We are still working to secure balance despite the steps that we have taken in the course of the year to reallocate public expenditure, which will be reflected in the spring budget revisions that I put to Parliament and to the committee for scrutiny.

I thank Willie Rennie for his constructive contribution to the debate and assure him that I will follow up the points of dialogue that he raised in today’s discussions. He raised serious issues about the mental health budget and long Covid, and I agree with his reflections on the energy market and the significant opportunity for windfall taxation that has arisen out of the ludicrous profits that energy companies are making at a time when our constituents are facing such hardship. I very much welcome Willie Rennie’s constructive contribution, and we will try to build on that.

I obviously value the support that our partners in the Green Party are giving to the budget—Ross Greer referred to this budget as “progressive”—and I welcome the party’s contribution to ensuring that the issues of taxation are properly considered in the budget process and result in our being able to afford our priorities. That would not have been the case had we not taken those decisions, so the Green Party’s input into the discussions has been welcome.

It is not the first time in life that Kenneth Gibson has found himself in some controversy, but let me try, as always, to be the peacemaker in Parliament. [*Laughter.*] Murdo Fraser took great exception to the contribution of my colleague and friend Kenneth Gibson and asked whether members of the committee supported the reflections that Mr Gibson was putting on the record. I want to put on the record the words that I was met with when I went to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 4 October 2022, in the aftermath of the disastrous and catastrophic Kwarteng budget. I was met with:

“Good morning, Deputy First Minister”,

which is always a nice warm welcome, from my friend Liz Smith. She then said:

“I put it on record that I understand and accept that your job is much more difficult because of the difficulties that have been introduced by the Westminster Government, particularly with regard to the forecast.”—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 4 October 2022; c 8.*]

It is important that Murdo Fraser’s bravado is disarmed by the calm and realistic contribution of Liz Smith to the Finance and Public Administration Committee debate, which I appreciated, because

she was right: at that moment, I was wrestling with significant difficulties, and I continue to do so. I am, of course, delighted to hear more from Liz Smith.

Liz Smith: That is very kind, Mr Swinney. In my calm demeanour, I ask the cabinet secretary whether he agrees with the political aspects of the speech of the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee and considers that they were appropriate in a convener's speech.

John Swinney: It is really important that Government ministers do not interfere in the business of committees, so I shall resist the temptation to get myself into trouble, which I constantly try to avoid. [*Laughter.*]

On that subject, I want to explain to members how the budget operates, because I think that a few members, including Stephen Kerr, have struggled with the concept today. I think that Mark Griffin struggled a little bit, too; I am normally very appreciative of his contributions, but perhaps his cold put him under the weather today and derailed his speech.

When we get Barnett consequentials, they flow into the total funding envelope that is available, and then the total funding envelope gets allocated. What is in the budget document is the sum total of all the resources that are at my disposal. Therefore, when Stephen Kerr asks me where the £100 million of education consequentials from the UK Government are, the answer is that they are fully allocated in the budget. I will give two examples of where they have ended up.

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

John Swinney: Oh, no. Let me finish the explanation, because Stephen Kerr needs to hear it—he is desperately in need of hearing this explanation. The £100 million of education consequentials are allocated to support the expenditure in the budget that will result in an increase for universities and colleges of £46 million and an increase in the local government budget of £550 million. Local government are the people who deliver education services in our country. I hope that that helps Stephen Kerr to understand the situation.

Sarah Boyack: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I said that I would give way to Stephen Kerr first.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his explanation. That is exactly what I was asking when I intervened: where is the additional £100 million? He has now explained that it is in the local government budget, yet that is the same local government—through COSLA—that is

complaining about the fact that it has to make cuts. I am asking whether the Barnett education consequentials will be added to the education spend, and the answer to that is clearly no.

John Swinney: I think that Stephen Kerr has demonstrated that he does not have a single clue about how the public finances of Scotland work. I am not going to explain it again; he will have to go and read the *Official Report*, because I have just given the explanation. He has demonstrated that he is singularly unfit to contribute to today's debate. It is absolutely appalling. The same explanation applies to Mark Griffin's point about the £550 million for local government.

In the course of the debate, Kenneth Gibson made the fair point that, where alternative choices are suggested, there must be a funding source for them.

I will marshal what the Conservatives have said. They have said that they want more money for housing—Miles Briggs said that. They want more money for city deals—Douglas Lumsden said that. They want more money for local government—Miles Briggs and Douglas Lumsden said that. They want more money for business rates—Douglas Lumsden and Liz Smith said that. They oppose the tax increases. I point out, for the sake of completeness, that if we did not make the tax increases, we would have less money available to us. Stephen Kerr wants education to get more money and Miles Briggs wants health to get more money.

I simply say to Parliament that that is economic illiteracy of the highest order, because no source has been identified for those funding resources. [*Interruption.*] I would give way, but the Presiding Officer wishes me to close my remarks.

The Presiding Officer: Indeed.

John Swinney: I will happily engage with Mr Rennie and anyone else who wants to talk about which area of the budget we can take money from to allocate to another to support priorities, but it is not helpful to the dialogue and the discourse in Parliament to put forward proposals that play to a gallery or a lobby, but which do not have a hope of ever being delivered, because the money does not exist—

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude.

John Swinney: —because of the failure of the economic management of the United Kingdom Government, which is the problem that I am wrestling with today.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-07727, in the name of John Swinney, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

We will have a brief suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-07727, in the name of John Swinney, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The Presiding Officer: I call George Adam to cast a proxy vote on behalf of Jamie Hepburn.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): On behalf of Jamie Hepburn, I vote yes.

The Presiding Officer: The vote is now closed.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My system crashed. I would have voted no.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 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)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 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)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (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)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 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)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 68, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No. 2) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. Members who are leaving the chamber should do so quietly.

Male Suicide in Scotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-06977, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on male suicide in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament is concerned by Scotland’s suicide rate and the latest statistics showing that 75.03% of people who died by suicide in 2021 were men, continuing a long-term trend whereby men are more likely than women to take their own life across all age groups; notes that in Perth and Kinross, during 2017-2021, the overall rate of suicide was 16.8 per 100,000, which is higher than the national average of 14.1 per 100,000; understands that suicide is a complex behaviour and there is rarely a single factor involved, but that there is strong evidence of associations with financial difficulties and mental health; is concerned, in the midst of an ongoing and deepening cost of living crisis, by the statistic from Samaritans Scotland, highlighted at a recent Cost of Living Summit, that men living in the most deprived areas are up to 10 times more at risk of suicide than those living in the most affluent areas; welcomes the Scottish Government’s 10-year strategy to tackle the factors and inequalities that can lead to suicide; commends groups such as Andy’s Man Club that offer a safe environment for men to talk about issues and problems that they have faced and are currently facing, and notes the view that, by discussing this issues openly, MSPs can follow what it sees as this good example, which could have an effect in reducing existing stigma and encouraging people across Scotland to have important conversations addressing their mental health.

17:07

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): First, I thank the many members who have stayed tonight to support the debate, especially given that it is being held on a Thursday evening at very late notice.

The band Stereophonics wrote a song called “Local Boy in the Photograph”, and there is a lyric in it that has always touched me very deeply. It goes:

“And all the friends lay down the flowers
 Sit on the banks and drink for hours
 Talk of the way they saw him last
 Local boy in the photograph”.

Every one of us in the chamber has at least one local boy in the photograph. When Kelly Jones wrote those lyrics, he was writing about a 23-year-old lad called Paul David Boggis. He described him, saying:

“he was a really cool kid and he was a good looking kid. He was kind of one of those ones that you looked and thought, ‘He’s got it all.’”

For me, Neil, Deano and Gav all had their times, and I can remember when I saw each one of them. I saw Neil as he and I were talking when a

very beautiful young lady walked across the road on Perth High Street. He remarked on how beautiful she was, and I then told him that we were actually a couple. That beautiful young lady was to become my wife, and we had our kids. I have often reflected on that moment, because it always struck me that we were two young guys in our 20s, with it all out there in front of us, and so much to come, and I think about where our lives then took us.

Neil was a good-looking guy, full of fun and outward confidence, and he had a great voice. He would sing in the pub where I used to work on a Sunday—his voice was amazing. All his close pals called him “Fluffy”, and I never thought to ask why, but afterwards I always wished that I had asked. I bet that they would sit on the banks and recall why they called him Fluffy, and laugh at whatever it was that brought about that nickname.

With Deano, we were all on a tartan army trip. Deano’s fancy-dress outfits were legend. Members can just imagine some European city being invaded by marauding hordes of tartan-clad Scotland fans, singing songs, drinking copious amounts of local refreshments and having loads of fun as the locals stared on in wonder. They would see Deano, dressed up as either the Pink Panther, Spider-Man or a gorilla, lowping around and entertaining folk wherever he happened to bump into them—I mean that quite literally. He just made folk laugh.

Deano was also a great football player. I played alongside him at school, although I have to point out—for all the guys in Perth going, “Aye, right, Fairlie”—that I was never a great football player. He was the guy who drove everyone on, with a steely determination to win every ball and every game. He was a year younger than me at school, but on the park he was someone I genuinely looked up to and admired.

I met Gav for the last time in Tesco, and he was raging against the injustice of what the Tories were doing. He had not long lost his dad during Covid, and I was telling him about how ill my dad was, having contracted it and then taken delirium. We were talking about how we would get back to normal, whatever that was going to be, and we parted in very good spirits, both talking about our absolute determination that things were going to get better and we would be an independent country—sorry, guys.

Gav was that paradox: a flawed, tortured guy who was immeasurably kind, funny and generous to a fault. He was also a fabulous musician. He had an immense stage presence and could play like a demon, and he had a voice that just exploded out of him. He was Neil’s friend, and they played together in the same pub that I spoke about earlier. There might have been a gap of

nearly 30 years between the loss of each of them to suicide, but each loss had the same devastating effect on those who were closest to them. Quite simply, it should never have happened.

At Gav’s funeral, his best friend, Roddy, told me that he had spoken to Gav in the week before he died. He had reminded him of Fluffy’s funeral and said, “If Fluffy knew the effect his death had had on folk, he would never have done it.” Even knowing that, and having lived through the pain, Gav still could not stop himself from doing it.

I have been in contact with all the families of these guys, and they are okay with having their loved ones spoken about in the debate, because they know that the way that we help to tackle this horrendous, needless loss of life is not to hide from it or stigmatise it but to talk—and talk loudly and often—about it so that those who need help know that help is there.

That brings me on to what we do about the risk of death by suicide and the means of allowing us to prevent it. According to Public Health Scotland records, the number of deaths by suicide has fallen slightly overall, but it is still stubbornly high, and men outnumber women, with men being three times more likely than women to die by suicide. The reasons for people taking their lives are complex, but many of those who die are known to mental health services before they are lost.

In Scotland, men in the most deprived areas are three times more likely to die by suicide than those in the most affluent areas. Financial stress is a critical cause of male suicide so, with the current cost of living crisis, we have to be more vigilant than ever, because suicide is still the highest killer of men under the age of 50.

Although we have to talk about those statistics, it is, for me, more important to talk about how we help to make things better. The Government has a policy in place—I will leave it to the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care to speak about that—but there are other things that are vital in helping men who are in crisis. One is Andy’s Man Club—if members have not heard of it, they can use this debate to find out what it is. It is a fantastic organisation that was born out of the tragic loss, once again, of a 23-year-old, Andy Roberts, who died from suicide in Halifax in 2016. His mother and brother-in-law set up Andy’s Man Club, with the catchphrase, “It’s okay to talk”.

The Samaritans is another fabulous organisation that is doing great work, as it has done since I was a boy. My mother used to be on late-night phone calls from folk who were in real distress, so this is not a new problem.

What do we do? In our position as MSPs, we have a role in ensuring that the conversation continues tonight and tomorrow, and continuously,

so that more lives are saved. It is critical that we raise awareness and remove the stigma of suicide so that we can talk about it openly. I intend to organise a reception in Parliament later in the year so that we can bring folk together and do as much as we can to continue the conversations that will help to save more lives.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Mr Fairlie for bringing the debate to the chamber. Does he welcome the intervention of Motherwell Football Club and its community trust? The club raises suicide awareness on its strips and has done much in the area where I live and where, unfortunately, I know many people who have succumbed to suicide. Does he welcome the initiative of Motherwell Football Club to encourage people to talk?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely welcome that and encourage every football club throughout Scotland to do exactly the same.

We should treat tonight's debate as just the start, because there is more to do as the parliamentary session progresses so that there are not more families and friends talking about the local boy in the photograph.

17:15

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I commend Jim Fairlie on his moving speech and his important campaign on the subject.

Police officers are Scotland's everyday heroes. They deal with people who are dangerous and who abuse them, threaten them, spit at them and attack them. They deal with people who are vulnerable, anxious, unpredictable and a risk to themselves and others. They are there at the darkest of times. When death occurs, it is police officers who see the bodies of adults and children. Some of those people have died of natural causes, while others have been the victims of extreme violence or horrific accidents. Then there are those who end their own lives. It is police officers who must knock on doors and tell families that their loved one has gone. It should be no surprise, therefore, that many officers end up in a dark place.

In my past life as a journalist, I investigated a number of suicides of police officers, the majority of whom were men. I discovered a strange reluctance by the authorities to ask questions. Nine months ago, I asked Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority how many officers had died from suicide. They said that they did not know. The SPA later said that there was nothing to suggest that any of the recent cases were caused directly by work pressures. I disagree.

There is readily available evidence that some of the officers whom I had inquired about were subject to protracted work-related difficulties. Their friends tell me that, although suicide is complex, some of those officers were under serious and sustained pressure and were consumed by a process that they felt was unjust. One officer who twice came close to ending his own life told me that there is a clear link between some suicides and the policing culture, including its disciplinary processes.

I asked the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service how many of those suicides had been the subject of a fatal accident inquiry. The answer was none—not a single one. It is worth noting that every death in custody is rightly the subject of an FAI. Evidence is assessed. Facts are established. Judicial scrutiny is applied. Mistakes, wrongdoing and systemic failings can then be identified and put right. Why is there a lack of curiosity when a police officer dies from suicide? I believe that there are two main factors. The first is respect for the dead and their grieving relatives, friends and colleagues. The other is perhaps less easy to understand.

Some officers believe that some people in authority do not like to ask questions that might yield uncomfortable answers about the pressures that are placed on officers by the organisation, their role and the more general lack of support for those in need. One officer described the lack of FAIs as "nothing short of disgraceful".

Some of that might sound shocking or, perhaps, unpalatable, but it needs to be said. Although, with the help of debates such as Mr Fairlie's, there has been a transformation in the way in which we in society understand and talk about mental health, it is clear that more—much more—still needs to be done. Officers deserve greater understanding and more support. I am afraid that, if the authorities maintain their blinkered approach, there is a risk that more officers will die.

17:19

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Jim Fairlie for securing this debate about male suicide. It is okay to talk about suicide. As a country, in our communities and with friends and loved ones, we simply cannot say enough, because talking openly about suicide opens the door for people to get the help that they need.

In recent years, there has been a sizeable shift in the number of people, particularly men, having those conversations. It is encouraging to see the change in attitude among younger men about what are perceived as acceptable masculine norms. I am sure that most of the mature men here would agree that, when we were growing up,

it was not unusual to hear expressions such as, “man up”, “boys don’t cry”, or “toughen up”. We were taught that crying, talking about our feelings or showing our emotions was weak and was not the manly thing to do. That toxic masculinity is becoming more and more a thing of the past.

That is great news for men, because we all feel overwhelmed by difficult emotions or situations at times. Over time, suppressing emotions, or a lack of openness about our mental health, only make things progressively worse, leading to a range of mental and physical problems, including anxiety, depression, stress, aggression and violence, or to the use of alcohol or drugs to try to block out our feelings.

As we have heard, in 2021 there were 753 deaths by suicide in Scotland. Although that is the lowest number since 2017, the figure attributed to men remains disproportionately high. The question remains: how do we tackle the inequalities that can lead to suicide and help the men who are most at risk? Just as there are many paths to finding the right support and feeling better, so there are a number of factors that contribute to men considering suicide.

We have heard about the fantastic Andy’s Man Club, and its peer-to-peer support groups. The approach of that group, and of others like it, works well because men go along when they need to and are ready to. For some people, that might be every week or every other week, while for others it might be once a month. There is no set eight or 12-week programme that ends suddenly and leaves people feeling lost. The club provides a safe space for men to talk about whatever storm they may be going through or have been through. Chances are that there will be other men in the room who have been through similar, if not identical, storms, and they will support each other to get through it.

In Kirkcaldy, we are fortunate to have not only Andy’s Man Club but the Pete’s Man Chat movement, which was launched in 2020 by Pete Melville after he had helped some of his own friends through tough times. The group offers men who feel that they have nowhere to turn a safe space where they can talk about their problems. The rise in groups such as those is a clear reflection of the progress that has been made in breaking down harmful stereotypes of what it means to be a man or how real men should deal with their problems.

I will share the story of a local business owner who described in his own words his experience of attending an Andy’s Man Club support group:

“Two years ago I was really struggling, my life was in turmoil for no apparent reason—I have a great family, brilliant job, and no real worries. Things were getting on top of me. I couldn’t sleep and was losing interest in the things I

love, and eventually my GP diagnosed me as having a nervous breakdown. For the first time in 25 years I was off my work and so uptight, restless and emotional—I tried various things to try to help but nothing worked for me ... When I left that first meeting ... I sat in my car and cried for an hour and a half, it felt like the world had been lifted from my shoulders. Without a doubt AMC saved my life. It is an amazing group of brothers which has helped me move forward ... Guys can just show up, there are no booking in or referrals. They can come and go as they please with no pressure. The hardest part will be walking through the doors for the first time, but they won’t look back after they do.”

We know that normalising the conversation about mental health and suicide in order to remove the stigma works, and we know that talking works—we have seen the benefits. We must carry on talking and must continue to promote conversations such as the ones that we are now having in our communities. It is estimated that every life lost to suicide has an impact on between six and 135 people, including families, friends, acquaintances and colleagues, as well as first responders. The evidence also shows that people bereaved by suicide are at greater risk of experiencing suicidal ideation and of attempting suicide themselves.

Just this afternoon, a good friend of mine posted a poem on Facebook:

“Men cry.
Men break down.
Men get anxiety.
Men feel insecure.
Men have emotions.
Men have mental illnesses.
It’s not ‘unmanly’ to struggle.
Let’s support men.
Let’s encourage men.
Don’t belittle or silence men.
Men struggle too.”

Educating people about the risk factors and warning signs and about how we can reduce and prevent stigma about men’s mental illness and suicide can make a real difference, so let’s keep Scotland talking.

17:25

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by thanking the member for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire for securing this motion for debate in the chamber today. I was happy to sign it in support and I commend him for a moving speech that really hammered home how important the issue is in our society. We often hear about public health emergencies and crises and, in my opinion, male suicide is a public health emergency that is often overlooked.

It is a public health emergency that disproportionately affects certain age groups more than others. It severely impacts on people from more deprived socioeconomic backgrounds, and it

drastically impacts on men more than women. It is vital that we understand why that is the case, but it is more important that we put in place tangible and measurable policies to deal with what is clearly an enormous problem. Those policies will require a whole-Government approach. We cannot simply view male suicide as a health problem and leave it to the health directorate to solve.

As Samaritans says, suicide is rarely caused by one thing but we do know that it is often an inequality issue and that there are strong associations between financial difficulties, poor mental health and suicide. We all know that the cost of living crisis is hitting working people hard and causing serious difficulties for millions of people who might otherwise never have experienced financial hardship. That should be a real cause for concern.

As Samaritans has reported, from August 2022 to October 2022, more than one in every 14 calls to its helpline were about concerns related to finance and unemployment—the highest level for at least five years. Between January 2022 and September 2022, its data shows that more than 100,000 emotional support contacts mentioned finance and unemployment concerns.

When we combine all those factors and consider the evidence and the data, that shows the impact that financial hardship can have on men, on those from particular socioeconomic backgrounds, and on those of certain ages. It is the recipe for a perfect storm.

As legislators and policymakers, we need to be alert to that and that is why today's debate is so important. We often throw metaphorical brickbats at each other across the chamber, but today's debate gives us the chance to come together and say as one Parliament that the issue requires not only a cross-Government response but a cross-party response that will have to encapsulate policy change in our public health system, our education system, our justice system and our housing and social security systems. Such a response will be required to get to the root cause of the fundamental inequalities that are engrained in our society and it will have to bring people together in the spirit of openness and transparency.

In that spirit of openness and transparency, and in an attempt to show that this is a crisis that does not discriminate and can impact on anyone, I will briefly share my own experience. Members will be aware that I lost my seat as a member of the House of Commons in 2019, and less than three months later we were in a national lockdown with no end in sight. I live alone and, after just a few months, I found myself relying on benefits to make ends meet. I was doing some volunteer work with a couple of different charities that were helping asylum seekers who were living in hotel

accommodation in Glasgow, and I was working with Peter Krykant at the unofficial overdose prevention centre in Glasgow's Trongate. Every day, I was seeing people who were living on the very edge having been forced there in many cases by Government policies, whether drug or asylum related, and it took its toll.

There were times when I would be going home to my flat alone, staring at the four walls, struggling to see an end to the lockdown and failing to see any kind of light at the end of the tunnel. There was no positive destination in sight after various job opportunities fell through. At times, it felt as though there was nothing more than an ex-MP. My mental health was really suffering. There were times when I did not care whether I was alive or not.

I did not have an immediate feeling that I was going to do something deliberate to end my life, but there was certainly an ambivalence about whether I wanted to continue living. My self-esteem and sense of purpose were at rock bottom. It was only thinking about the impact that it might have on my family and friends that held me back.

I do not say this for sympathy and I certainly do not say it for attention. I simply say it to raise awareness and illustrate how quickly things can turn and how quickly people can be impacted who might never have felt feelings like that before. No matter how secure, happy or successful someone might seem to be, it does not take much for those pillars of support in life to collapse. The resulting trauma and despair can be all too tragic for many people, and we have heard today how it affects them.

I once again congratulate and applaud the member for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire for bringing the motion to the chamber today. I assure him that he has an ally in me and I will work with him and anyone else to bring about an end to an often-overlooked crisis in our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick, who joins us online.

17:30

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am grateful to my colleague Jim Fairlie for raising such an important issue and doing it so powerfully. That was a cracking contribution and I am glad to hear that he has support in the chamber. In his motion, he asks us to discuss the issue openly. He certainly did that and it is something that I always hope to do.

The statistics on male suicide are overwhelming, and it is clearly a gendered issue. It is also a deeply personal issue for me, having

been bereaved by male suicide at the age of four. I understood more than many do about depression and what it can do to people before I even learned my times tables.

I also had an early insight into what the idea of idyllic Highland life masks. Folk hear about the beautiful scenery that we have here, and how Orkney or Inverness are the happiest places to live, and they imagine a peaceful, joyful life free of stress and sadness. I love the islands, Ross-shire and Inverness, but suicide rates in the Highlands, Orkney and the Western Isles are the highest in the country.

Male-dominated jobs such as farming, fishing and forestry, which are important sectors in the Highlands and Islands, also have some of the highest suicide rates. Last year, Change Mental Health shared with me a survey that showed that four fifths of farmers under the age of 40 consider mental health to be the biggest hidden problem facing the agricultural community.

Perception might only go so far, but I worry about what the flashy tourism lines say to those who are suffering. A quiet view of a loch and the feeling of being alone in nature can be wonderfully relieving for someone who is content. When they are depressed, it can be isolating to the point of being deadly. When someone sees the news articles claiming that the area that they live in is the happiest place to live, and that does not match up with their emotions, they can feel as though they are wrong. They might think "Well, if I'm here, and I'm unhappy, I won't ever be happy anywhere".

I can see views across Inverness from the window next to me here, and I have always loved the sight of its skyline. Seeing the tower of Raigmore hospital and the four red lights at the top of the Kessock bridge, whether I am coming up the A9, through Culloden on the train, or from over Nairn way, has always meant that I am almost home. As a kid, it meant that we were about half an hour away from Alness and possibly that it was time to stop for a takeaway.

Recently, however, I look at those sights and wonder whether another human is in accident and emergency at Raigmore or out on the streets in intense, overwhelming, crushing pain, being talked to by a police officer and going through that internal struggle of desperately wanting it all to be over versus that nagging human instinct to survive.

I know that discussions are on-going about what can be done to prevent travel route closures in the Highlands because of concern for people, but we need to be clear that that is not just an issue for the transport portfolio. We need to make sure that

folk can access the mental health help that they need.

One final thing I want to raise is the comment that Jim Fairlie's motion rightly makes about the link between deprivation and mental illness and suicide. The problem with accurately measuring rural deprivation in my region in a way that allows us to successfully compare it with that in urban areas has never been solved, and we know that there are folk in really difficult situations living in areas that the Scottish index of multiple deprivation will tell us are doing quite well. Poverty is harder to see, and perhaps easier to ignore, in sparsely populated areas. Constituents tell me constantly that they are more likely to try to keep it quiet in communities where everyone likes to know everyone else's business.

We have to do more to tackle male suicide rates, but it is clear that the problems and solutions will be different in rural and island communities.

My thanks again go to Jim Fairlie and all who supported his motion. I look forward to the minister's reply.

17:34

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): I thank Jim Fairlie for lodging his motion and giving the emotional speech that he gave, and I thank the families of Neil, Deano and Gav for allowing Jim to talk about their story today. I recognise how much of a loss those guys are to Jim and many others. In his speech, David Torrance talked about the impact of suicide on friends and families, but entire communities can be affected by suicide. That is why suicide is everyone's business.

Every suicide is a tragedy that has a profound and devastating impact on people's lives. Although the number of people taking their lives has fallen in the past two years, we are determined to do more to further reduce suicide deaths in Scotland, because there are still far too many.

In October last year, I asked members to support the new 10-year suicide prevention strategy from the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which has a vision to reduce suicide deaths in Scotland while tackling the inequalities that contribute to suicide. As Mr Fairlie's motion says, deprivation is a key risk factor for suicide, which is why the new strategy, called "Creating Hope Together" sets out how we will tackle the social determinants and inequalities that increase the risk of suicide by taking a whole-government and whole-society approach. Mr Sweeney mentioned that in his speech.

In practice, that means that we are integrating suicide prevention with key programmes of work, such as those on child poverty and homelessness. The strategy goes beyond that. We must look right across Government, at every aspect of everything that we do. Despite being a former building standards minister, I had never really thought about what building standards or planning can do to help decrease the number of suicides in our country. I have learned that there is a role for every minister in getting that right, and I am really pleased that colleagues have co-operated with that strategy and recognised that we all have a contribution to make in reducing suicide.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

The minister says that every minister has a role to play. He is probably aware of the good work done by the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution, which was founded in order to assist cases of hardship and poverty in rural Scotland, particularly among farmers, who may not see another human being for months at a time. That institution does great work to reduce financial pressures and perhaps to reduce suicide too. Will the minister work with Mairi Gougeon to consider how we can continue supporting RSABI in its good work?

Kevin Stewart: I will, of course, talk to my colleague Mairi Gougeon about the issues that Mr Ewing has raised. I recognise that those in rural communities, or who work in farming, often have difficulties that have not been talked about enough. Last night, I spoke to Emma Harper, who is a member of the cross-party group on rural policy. The subject of last night's meeting was mental health in rural communities. We all have work to do in promoting what we are doing, continuing to reduce stigma and getting people to talk about their own experiences.

The new strategy prioritises key parts of the workforce, including those who work in rural pursuits. We are working with the money advice sector so that we can reach and support people who are at higher risk of suicide when experiencing financial distress. Let us be honest: there is a lot of financial distress out there at the moment. That approach is all the more important during a cost of living crisis, because that is having a significant impact on people's lives.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Does the minister agree that great work is being done by the Scottish Men's Sheds Association? Without getting political, I hope that he will have a word with the Deputy First Minister to see whether the money that was removed from the association's funding can be reinstated, because it does a lot of good work that contributes to this area.

Kevin Stewart: I had a discussion last night with my colleague Tom Arthur, whom I believe is in discussions with the Scottish Men's Sheds Association. I should say that, right across the country, that organisation has benefited greatly from the adult communities mental health and wellbeing fund, and I would ask that it continues to use third sector interfaces to apply for funding for local communities.

The cost of living crisis is creating enormous strain across our communities, and poverty has a huge impact on mental health. People who are already struggling with poor mental health and money worries are likely to be among the hardest hit, which leads to rising levels of anxiety and distress. That is why we are taking actions to mitigate some things and ensure that we get to our most vulnerable citizens.

We have put £15 million into the adult communities mental health and wellbeing fund in 2022-23. It is so important that we continue to invest in that, because the stories that I have heard from organisations and individuals who have benefited from that funding are pretty immense, and it has made a real difference. One important protective factor against suicide is social connection, and I am delighted that the fund has helped in that regard. A lot of work focuses on adults who are socially isolated and lonely, and the fund has supported a range of projects that focus on men, including Ewen's Room in Lochaber and Man On Inverclyde.

I also want to touch on peer support, which is central to the new strategy. A number of folk have mentioned Andy's Man Club. In recent months I have met Andy's Man Club and visited Men Matter Scotland to learn about their great work on using peer support to help men with their mental health. In recognising the issues that Emma Roddick brought to bear, I will say that I visited Fort William with Samaritans Scotland. We have a project with it in west Highland that aims to support the mental health of isolated workers in remote areas. What I have taken away from all those visits is that peer support can give people—particularly men—a deep connection that not only offers personal support but can create a pathway to recovery.

That peer support is also prevalent in work that is going on in football clubs—including, as Ms Adamson said, Motherwell Football Club—and through the changing room project, on which we are in partnership with the Scottish Association for Mental Health and a number of football clubs across the country. Of course, there is also the great work of the FC United to Prevent Suicide team, which encourages the footballing community in Scotland to talk more openly about mental health and suicide. There are many more

organisations that I could mention, but I know that time is against me.

I thank Mr Fairlie for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank all members for their contributions, views and experiences. I will take on board what has been said. Mr Findlay talked about the experiences of police officers. Although we have looked at a number of sectors, perhaps we need to do a bit more on that, and we will do that. My door is always open to anyone, because this work needs to be cross party in order to get it absolutely right, and I want that to happen. We all have a role to play in destigmatising suicide prevention and making it everyone's business, as I said earlier.

My last point is an appeal to everyone in the chamber and to folk right across the country. Often, when ask people how they are feeling, we get a stock response. When I am asked how I am doing, my stock response is, "Fair to middling," and that is it, but sometimes I am not fair to middling. Sometimes, when you ask somebody twice, you get the true picture of what is going on with them, and that often opens up the opportunity for further discussion to help them to find the right solutions to get over the mental health difficulties that they might be having. Do not just take the first answer—please ask twice. We can all play our part in helping folk and reducing suicide right across our country.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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