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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 18 April 2023

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# Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 18 April 2023*

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Drew Gebbie, who is the minister for Hamilton South parish church, which is linked with Quarter parish church.

**The Rev Drew Gebbie (Hamilton South and Quarter Parish Churches):** Good afternoon, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Reportedly, moving house is one of the most stressful things that anyone can do. My wife and I can certainly testify to that, as it has been only a year since we moved into the manse that we currently reside in and, in a week's time, we will move again, into our church's new manse.

However, anxiety and stress come in many forms—none more so than the anxiety and stress that are being felt by thousands of people throughout Scotland today. In every town, city and village in Scotland, anxiety and stress have now become an everyday condition for thousands of Scots because there are so many things in society these days for people to stress about—fuel costs, food prices, the price of clothes and so much more. Life is hard and it is becoming harder, and not just for people who are unemployed or on lower incomes: everyone is feeling it. Food banks are reporting that middle-income families are now regularly using them to help them to get through the week.

In St Paul's letter to the Philippians, Christians are given these words to live by:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Those are words of comfort, and I pray that they help Christians to cope. However, would not it be ideal if we could get to a point where our anxiety was diminished enough that, as a nation, we could live wisely and thoughtfully no matter the decisions that we face or whatever the challenges before us as peoples of this nation?

Strong, wise and compassionate leadership at times such as those that we are all experiencing right now is essential. The leadership that was

displayed by Jesus embodies the forms of leadership that are needed in difficult times: servant leadership; a leadership of acceptance; leadership that begins in the heart and then emanates to every corner of society; and leadership that calms the anxious heart and relieves the stressed mind, welcomes the unloved, clothes the naked and feeds the hungry. Those are the qualities that all nations and communities look to their leaders for.

Thank you.

## Topical Question Time

14:03

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is topical question time. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters "RTS" in the chat function during the relevant question. In order to get in as many members as possible, short questions and succinct answers would be appreciated.

### Deposit Return Scheme

**1. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the deposit return scheme, in light of the First Minister recently stating that he was actively looking at options around the scheme and that he was "taking advice". (S6T-01313)

**The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater):** Delivering a deposit return scheme is an important part of our environmental ambitions, and we remain committed to the scheme. However, we continue to need a decision from the United Kingdom Government on an exclusion for the scheme from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

Over the past few weeks, the First Minister and I have made it clear that we want more to be done to support small businesses to be part of our deposit return scheme. That includes looking at options to address their concerns with a view to identifying fair, legal and simple solutions that will allow this important scheme to go ahead. The First Minister will provide an update this afternoon on the Scottish Government's priorities for Scotland, which will include the deposit return scheme.

**Maurice Golden:** There was no answer there; I hope that the minister will be able to define the scheme, so that the UK Government can then make a decision.

With just four months to go until the scheme begins, the minister and the First Minister have floated major changes. As we stand here today, we have no clarity on what those changes will be, so I will ask the minister a very easy question. She has proposed changes in relation to small producers. What is the definition of "small producer"?

**Lorna Slater:** On working with businesses of all sizes, we want all businesses to participate in Scotland's deposit return scheme that are included by the regulations. As I said, the First Minister will

provide an update this afternoon on the Scottish Government's priorities for Scotland, which will include the deposit return scheme, and I will provide further details in my statement on Thursday. The First Minister and I have made it clear that we want more to be done to support small businesses to be part of our deposit return scheme, and we continue to assess the options.

**Maurice Golden:** There was no definition and no understanding of the difference between a small producer and a small business. It is no wonder that the scheme faces such severe problems, but there is more. The minister welcomed the award of the collections contract for deposit return to a multinational company with a dubious environmental record. When the Scottish Government agreed the proposition of DRS in 2021 with Circularity Scotland, it agreed that no new vehicles would be purchased and that no new sheds would be built, yet 200 gas-guzzling vehicles have been purchased and up to eight new sheds have been built. Why did the minister not hold Circularity Scotland to account?

**Lorna Slater:** Like similar deposit return schemes around the world, and under the legislation as passed by the Parliament, Scotland's deposit return scheme is an industry-led scheme. It is led by Circularity Scotland, which is a private not-for-profit company whose business decisions are for it to make. Circularity Scotland was set up by producers, retailers and wholesalers and, as a private company, it decides how to deliver the scheme for Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** As members can imagine, I have received a number of requests for supplementaries. I very much doubt that I will get them all in, but I will try to take as many as I can.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I understand that the current system of packaging waste recycling notes will end when Circularity Scotland's system kicks in. Who will benefit from the loss of PRNs? Who will experience a disbenefit?

**Lorna Slater:** The current PRN system is part of the producer responsibility system. The deposit return scheme is also a producer responsibility system, so we are working with the PRN scheme to ensure that, in the transfer from the existing scheme to the new scheme, anyone who has participated in the PRN scheme is not double charged and does not have to pay a producer responsibility charge twice.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** In a letter last week to the First Minister, the Campaign for Pubs spoke for the many small producers in my region when it said:

“DRS exists in many jurisdictions and is the right policy for our time, but couldn’t be realised in a worse manner than the Scottish proposed scheme ... The few winners ... appear to be large industrial drinks producers and one large recycling company, who are delighting in the sweeping away of SME competition.”

Why has the minister got this so badly wrong that so few small producers have signed up for the scheme, which they see as destroying their business?

**Lorna Slater:** I am not sure that the member has that right—hundreds of small producers have signed up to the scheme. Six hundred and seventy producers have signed up, including many hundreds of small producers. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Members.

**Lorna Slater:** As I have said, the First Minister and I have been clear that we want more to be done to support small businesses, including small producers, to be part of our deposit return scheme.

I will not pre-empt the statements from the First Minister or myself. The First Minister will provide an update on the Scottish Government’s priorities this afternoon and I will provide further details in my statement to Parliament on Thursday.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** Does the minister not recognise that the Scottish Government’s succession of changes and many U-turns on the proposal has, as Colin Smyth suggested, undermined any prospect of it delivering the scheme? Such schemes are being successfully operated in countries around the world, but the Government has made an absolute shambles of it. Does she realise the damage that that is causing businesses across the country?

**Lorna Slater:** I do not agree with the member’s characterisation of the scheme. There have been no U-turns, and we have been committed to the scheme from the start.

We have been listening to business and systematically working through business interests to ensure that they can participate in the scheme by, for example, streamlining the exclusion process, working on cash-flow issues and working on labelling issues for smaller runs of product. We have been doing all that in line with business requests. We will continue to work with businesses to make sure that they can all fully participate in the scheme.

If the member is concerned about uncertainty, I am sure that he is as shocked as I that, with just four months to go, the United Kingdom Government continues to keep us and Scottish businesses in limbo by not granting an exclusion from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 in a timely fashion. The uncertainty is frustrating

progress on the scheme and undermining certainty for businesses. I reiterate my call to the UK Government to follow the process and to grant the exclusion urgently, so that we can give businesses the certainty that they need.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** According to Circularity Scotland’s branding and communications plan, we should be two months into the consumer campaign ramp up for DRS. What precisely has been produced? Has the campaign started? If so, is it on track?

**Lorna Slater:** The beginning of the communications plan for the deposit return scheme is to ensure that businesses understand what they need to do. Circularity Scotland has ramped that up in the past two months in particular, to ensure that producers know and that those acting as return point operators understand what their obligations are, and it has been working them through the process of their signing up to and fully participating in the scheme.

First, we had producer registration. Now, we have return point operator registration open. Consumer comms will be part of that as that goes forward. In terms of communicating with consumers, all those steps are part of that communication plan.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** Last week, in a letter to the First Minister, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scotch Whisky Association, the Confederation of British Industry and many other business organisations—virtually all of them—argued that the DRS would increase consumer prices above the 20p deposit, hitting the poorest hardest. Even David Harris, the boss of CSL, who is paid £300,000 a year, admits that that is the case. Does the minister agree with the boss of her own agency? If so, why is she as a Green Party representative so intent on imposing, at the height of the cost of living crisis, price hikes to the poorest people in Scotland? It is a kind of green poll tax.

**Lorna Slater:** I remind the member that Circularity Scotland is a private not-for-profit company, not an agency of the Scottish Government. I also remind the member that the regulations for the deposit return scheme were passed by this Parliament, and we are implementing those regulations.

## **Council Tax (Second Homes)**

2. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how much additional revenue it anticipates that local authorities would be able to raise, in light of its reported proposals to enable them to double council tax on second homes. (S6T-01312)

**The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur):** As set out in the business and regulatory impact assessment, which was published alongside our joint consultation with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we estimate that there will be additional revenues of up to £35 million nationally.

Our proposals would give councils discretionary powers to set fairer and more appropriate council tax levels to support thriving communities and to prioritise homes for living. That, in conjunction with other action such as owning investment in building an additional 110,000 affordable homes, will contribute to achieving our aim for everyone in Scotland to live in a safe, warm and secure home in the place where they want to be.

**Mark Griffin:** People say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so I am delighted that the Government has decided to proceed with our proposals for an empty homes council tax escalator, which could raise an additional £30 million on top of the £35 million that the minister mentioned. The longer someone leaves a home empty, the more the absent owner should pay, but dragging out the doubling of council tax on second homes through yet more consultation is typical of the Government. It is wasting time, depriving our communities of cash that councils could be collecting right now.

The Government already has the powers, so can the minister confirm that primary legislation to deliver a council tax escalator, which will be key to the Government's new deal for local government, will be ready for councils to use in the next financial year?

**Tom Arthur:** The actions that we are taking reflect the commitments that we gave in our "Housing to 2040" strategy and, indeed, in the Bute house agreement. I appreciate that, from the calm waters of Opposition, the member's job is to simply call for things, but the Government has to deliver. In delivering legislation, we have a responsibility to consult, not least because engagement is a key part of our framework for tax.

I encourage all members and all stakeholders across Scotland to engage in that process. Through the existing legislative framework, there will be the opportunity, subject to the consultation, to introduce measures for the next financial year, 2024-25. As is set out in the consultation papers, going beyond that would require primary legislation. We will consider very carefully the feedback that we receive from the consultation and will, of course, update Parliament in due course.

**Mark Griffin:** Yesterday the First Minister said in his announcement that the powers will help to free up housing, which is an ambition that we

share, because we need to use the stock that we have in a better way. However, missing from the set of proposals are powers for local councillors to force the sale or rent of a property to deliver Labour's £1 home scheme for aspiring home owners or even the First Minister's key workers homes proposals. We should be creating a complete and comprehensive package of powers to tackle the issues of long-term empty homes and homelessness.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Could we have a question, please, Mr Griffin?

**Mark Griffin:** The Government said that it would deliver compulsory rent and sale powers, and the Scottish Land Commission and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership have agreed, so will the legislation that the minister talked about include those powers?

**Tom Arthur:** I cannot speak to legislation that will emerge via the consultation process, but the member raised a number of serious issues. I am sure that my colleague Paul McLennan, the Minister for Housing, would be happy to engage with him on particular aspects relating to housing.

On the matters relating to council tax and local taxation more generally—specifically, how such taxation can be used to achieve what I think are shared ambitions on housing—I would be more than happy to engage with the member on the detail during and after the consultation process. In the spirit of co-operation and being collegiate, I welcome the Labour Party's support for the Scottish Government's proposals.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Three members have requested to ask a supplementary question. I would like to take all three, but I will need the co-operation of members: there will need to be brief questions and succinct answers.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Given the clear and pressing issues relating to the lack of local housing in rural locations, particularly in my Perthshire South and Kinross-shire constituency, does the minister believe that doubling the council tax levy will be sufficient? Will he outline what other measures could be implemented to enable local authorities to achieve the policy aim of easing housing pressures?

**Tom Arthur:** The consultation invites views on the scale of council tax that it would be appropriate to apply to second and empty homes. I am pleased to say that, subject to the consultation outcome, we will be able to charge a double rate on second homes from April 2024, and we are certainly interested in views on granting powers for a more than 100 per cent increase in the longer term.

This is one of a raft of measures that we are taking to ease housing pressures in rural areas. More details will be announced in the First Minister's forthcoming statement.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I, too, am concerned that people on modest wages cannot afford to live locally, particularly in areas such as the east neuk of Fife. That is affecting the sustainability of those communities.

Like Jim Fairlie, I am not sure whether doubling the council tax on its own will be enough, because some people will happily pay the extra council tax in order to keep their second home. Has the minister considered licensing measures and planning powers to control the number of second homes?

**Tom Arthur:** The member will be aware of the work that we are undertaking on short-term lets, through both the planning system and licensing. He makes the point that tax in isolation will not necessarily achieve the outcomes that we want, but it can be an important tool. Through the consultation, we are primarily looking at the issue around council tax for empty homes and second homes and, in the short term—that is, from the next financial year—providing the ability to double the existing council tax levy. However, we are looking at what would be a reasonable amount beyond that. That would require change via primary legislation. We are also looking at the thresholds—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, could you direct your comments to the microphone, please?

**Tom Arthur:** I beg your pardon.

We are also looking at the thresholds on non-domestic rates, which apply to short-term lets as well. The consultation covers a number of areas. As I said, I am more than happy to engage with any member on the detail of that.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** Doubling the council tax on second and holiday homes is great and welcome progress, but I am really glad that the Scottish Government is interested in going further than that. Can the minister confirm whether the legislation that would be required to go further will come in the form of a new bill or will be part of upcoming legislation that is already planned, such as the local democracy bill or the housing bill? Regardless of which method is used, in which financial year does the Government expect local authorities to have that power to go further than 200 per cent?

**Tom Arthur:** Subject to the responses to the consultation, we will take immediate action, to the extent possible in secondary legislation, to deliver changes in time for the 2024-25 financial year.

That will allow for a premium of up to 100 per cent to be charged. As I mentioned, changes to allow councils to charge in excess of a 100 per cent premium on council tax on second homes and long-term empty properties would require primary legislation, so the outcome of that would be determined by the parliamentary process. Subject to the various responses that we receive in the consultation, we will assess the different routes to introduce changes, including any planned legislative vehicle such as the local democracy bill. I am happy to update Parliament and the member in due course.

## Government Priorities for Scotland

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf on “Our Priorities for Scotland”. The First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions. You have up to 20 minutes, First Minister.

14:21

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Just a few weeks ago, I could not have imagined that I would be standing here as First Minister, setting out the policy priorities and the defining missions of the Government that I lead. It is fair to say that being First Minister is not without its challenges but, notwithstanding that, it is the honour of my life. In my very first speech in this chamber after the result was announced, I made it clear that the people of Scotland’s priorities will be my priorities, too.

I have been clear from the outset that I intend to govern in the interests of the whole of Scotland, and I hope that the policy prospectus that has been published today is a demonstration of that. In setting out our course for the next three years, we are acknowledging—as we must—that Scotland faces genuinely difficult challenges. Our economy and public services are still recovering from a global pandemic. We are in the midst of a cost crisis, which of course has been made worse by the United Kingdom Government’s economic mismanagement and is harming people and hurting businesses right across the country. We need to play our part in addressing the global crises of climate change and nature loss.

It is worth stressing that we also face the most difficult public spending environment that this devolved Parliament has ever seen. The inflationary shocks created by a hard Brexit, a global pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the disastrous decisions taken as part of the UK Government’s mini-budget have placed great pressure on the public finances. Our ability to deal with that pressure is being constrained by UK Government spending decisions and, of course, a lack of borrowing powers.

In fact, the cost to Scotland of Westminster control—the cost of not being independent—has never been clearer. UK living standards have stagnated for 15 years. Indeed, the fall in living standards this year and next is expected to be the largest on record. According to the International Monetary Fund, the UK economy is to be among the worst performing of any of the major economies this year. The disastrous impact of

Brexit, which of course was supported by the Tories and Labour, is biting hard.

As a result, we have to make really tough decisions about our priorities. I will be unapologetic about making difficult decisions to ensure that we free up money or resource to target it at those who are in the greatest need. Where we can go further, within the constraints of devolution, I absolutely will.

However, for all the significant challenges that we face—and they are significant—we also know that we can build on our important successes. Scotland currently outperforms the UK on the unemployment rate, with unemployment among men over 16 at its lowest rate on record. National health service waiting times and our court backlogs are improving following the pandemic, and despite the public spending climate, we have expanded free childcare provision and introduced the game-changing Scottish child payment. Of course, Scotland continues to have a highly skilled workforce, world-class universities and colleges, and huge potential in some of the key economic sectors of the future.

Today, the Scottish Government publishes its policy prospectus, “Equality, opportunity, community: New leadership—A fresh start”, which sets out how the Government that I lead will address our challenges, build on the successes of the past and capitalise on our strengths. It sets out the key aims and deliverables that we intend to achieve in each cabinet secretary’s portfolio, working constructively with our Green Party colleagues.

Throughout the next three years we will report routinely, regularly and transparently on our performance against those aims and outcomes. The report also emphasises that this Government’s work will be defined by three distinct and interdependent missions. Those missions, centred on the principles of equality, opportunity and community, require us to tackle poverty, build a fair, green and growing economy and improve our public services. Over the next three years they will be central to our efforts to improve the lives of the people of Scotland.

The first mission, which is based on equality, is to continue to tackle poverty in all its forms, and to substantially reduce child poverty in particular. Inevitably, the immediate focus will be on protecting people as far as we possibly can from the harm that is inflicted by UK Government policies and the on-going cost of living crisis. That means that we will often choose to target spending so that it benefits those who need it most.

That is one reason why the very first action that I undertook as First Minister was to increase the fuel insecurity fund to £30 million. Over the next

three years we will also invest a further £1.3 billion in the Scottish child payment. We will further develop our social security system and ensure that it continues to treat people with dignity, fairness and respect. We will expand the provision of free school meals. We will reduce the number of children who go into care, and we will keep our promise to those who are care experienced.

We will work to ensure that drug deaths reduce over the next three years. We recognise how crucial housing is to our aspirations for a fairer country. We will continue to work with local government to reduce the number of people living in temporary accommodation. Subject to the will of the Scottish Parliament, we will legislate to secure a new deal for tenants and introduce duties to prevent homelessness.

We will invest in order to make homes and buildings greener, and we will continue to deliver affordable homes—the majority of which will be for social rent—in all parts of our country. We will also publish an action plan for housing in remote, rural and island areas. I confirm today that that plan will include up to £25 million from our affordable homes budget to allow suitable properties, including empty houses, to be purchased or long leased and turned into affordable homes for key workers and others.

We will also engage with the public to explore how best we can use our current taxation powers to deliver the most progressive taxation system in the UK and achieve the Government's three missions, which I have outlined today.

Scotland is a wealthy country, but that wealth is not distributed evenly. To tackle poverty we need to be even bolder on taxation and the redistribution of wealth. That is why I will convene an anti-poverty summit, to which I will invite experts, academics, anti-poverty campaigners and those with lived experience. I will also invite Opposition colleagues, as I believe that tackling poverty is a shared priority for us all.

We will also continue to support equality, inclusion and human rights, and we will implement more of the recommendations of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls.

Presiding Officer, I take great pride in being the first First Minister from an ethnic minority background. I know that my rights are interdependent on the rights of others. The Government that I lead will not only protect the rights of minorities, but where possible, will advance them, particularly those of the most marginalised people in our society.

During the parliamentary session, we will introduce a human rights bill to incorporate, within the limits of our devolved competence, international standards on economic, social,

cultural and environmental rights. That is in stark contrast to a UK Government that pursues divisive immigration policies and risks denying sanctuary to people in their hour of need. We will continue to support those who come to Scotland fleeing war and persecution. We will also continue to support the many thousands of people who have come from Ukraine during the past year: for as long as Scotland is their home, they will be welcomed here and supported.

Through those actions and many more, during the next three years, we will make significant progress towards making Scotland a fairer country. However, our ambition to make Scotland fairer must go hand in hand with our work to make the country more prosperous. That is why the second national mission is based on the principle of opportunity. That means using all the powers that we have to their maximum effect to support economic growth for a purpose: to help business and trade to thrive and to maximise the opportunity for a fair green economy.

A crucial part of that is about making a just transition to net zero. We will never do to oil and gas workers in the north-east of Scotland what Thatcher did to our mining and steel communities. *[Applause.]* We will take the workers of the north-east—and, indeed, the whole of Scotland—with us on our just transition journey. We will harness the huge potential of the green economy in Scotland. The ScotWind programme on its own offers the potential for £28 billion of supply-chain work based in Scotland. Our renewable energy resources will also help us to develop a new hydrogen sector, which is why a focus for the next three years is to lay the foundations for a hydrogen supply chain in Scotland.

We will also continue to support innovation and entrepreneurship. Through policies such as our investment in new technology scaler hubs, we hope to make Scotland one of the leading nations in Europe for business start-ups. We will also develop centres of excellence for sectors such as green technologies, health and life sciences, digital industries and advanced manufacturing.

As we do that, we will seek to support economic growth and ensure that wealth is evenly distributed. Therefore, we will continue to invest in skills so that people are able to take advantage of new opportunities. We will encourage growth in every part of Scotland by working with local and regional partners.

In setting out our plans for the economy, I also want to make a broader point about the Government's relationship with the business community. I am the proud son of a business owner. In fact, just this month, my dad's business turned 40 years old and, despite our family efforts to the contrary, Mr Yousaf Snr has no plans to

retire just yet. Businesses—small businesses in particular—are the backbone of our economy and Government support for business is essential for the delivery of a wellbeing economy.

We need businesses to grow to create the good, well-paying jobs that will enable us to reinvest in initiatives to eradicate poverty. We also rely on businesses and their workers to pay the taxes that our public services rely on. That is why there has never been a conflict, to my mind, between supporting our economy to grow, in line with our net-zero ambitions, and introducing policies, such as progressive taxation, that enable us to reduce poverty. They go hand in hand as part of the wellbeing economy that many of us support.

We also need some Government regulation of business. The business community itself recognises that an unrestricted market is incompatible with the wellbeing of our people, communities and environment. However, the balance needs to be right. A number of business organisations have expressed concerns in recent months about the balance that the Scottish Government has been striking. In fact, they have called for a reset of the relationship between business and Government. I am happy to start that reset today. I will do so by confirming three specific steps.

The first relates to the deposit return scheme. I remain committed to the scheme as a way to increase recycling, reduce litter on our streets and beaches and help achieve our net zero ambitions. However, we recognise the uncertainty that continues to be created as a result of the UK Government delaying the decision to exclude the scheme from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

Of course, we had hoped for a decision on that this week, but it has not come. At the same time, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity and I have heard the concerns of business, in particular about the readiness for the launch of the scheme this August. As a result, we will delay the launch of the scheme until 1 March 2024. *[Interruption.]* I am pleased that that has universal support from members around the chamber.

That will provide 10 months for businesses to get ready. We will use the additional time to work with business and Circularity Scotland to address concerns about the scheme's—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, First Minister. I have given a bit of latitude, but it is getting quite noisy in the chamber.

**The First Minister:** It is okay, Presiding Officer. Members are really excited about the policy perspective that I have brought to the chamber today. It is not a problem: I have always said that I

will reach across the political divide, where necessary.

As I was saying, we will use the additional time to work with businesses and Circularity Scotland to address concerns with the deposit return scheme and ensure a successful launch next year.

We have developed a package of measures to simplify and de-risk the scheme and to support small businesses, in particular in the hospitality sector. The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity will this week provide further details to Parliament on the package, the new timetable and our engagement with the UK Government on the critical decisions that we now need it to make to allow the scheme to proceed, in terms of exemption from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

The second step relates to the Scottish Government's consultation on restrictions to alcohol advertising. The aim of the consultation, which is to reduce the harm to children that is caused by alcohol, is more than admirable and I support it whole-heartedly. However, it is clear that some of the proposals have caused real concern to an industry that is already facing challenges on multiple fronts. I have therefore instructed my officials to take the ideas back to the drawing board and to work with the industry and, crucially, with public health stakeholders to agree a new set of proposals.

I believe that we all want to reduce the harm that is caused by alcohol, particularly to young people, but to do so without undermining Scotland's world-class drinks industry or tourism sector. I am hopeful that, by taking a fresh look at the issue, we can find a way forward that achieves both those crucial aims.

Finally, I have written to key business representative groups and asked them to engage in urgent discussions with the Scottish Government to agree a new deal for Scottish businesses. The discussions will be chaired jointly by the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy and a representative of the business sector. Among other things, the discussions will explore how the Government can better support our businesses and communities using the policy levers that it has, including non-domestic rates. I have asked the co-chairs to report back to me this summer with initial thoughts.

Those three steps will all, I trust, be welcomed individually by Scotland's business community, and I hope that, collectively, they send a broader signal about this Government's approach to business. The Government knows that Scotland can be successful only if our businesses are successful, so I say to them, as First Minister, that

my door will always be open to you. We might not always agree, but I will always give you a fair hearing, and I will seek to address your concerns wherever possible. All three of the missions that I am setting out today depend on a thriving business sector in Scotland, so the Government that I lead will do everything that it can to help you to prosper.

Our third and final mission, which is based on community, is to focus on delivery of key public services—for example, the NHS and social care, schools and childcare, the police and justice, and public transport.

In the past three years, the NHS has faced the greatest challenge in its 74-year existence. Its staff have performed magnificently in the face of the pandemic. We will invest in the NHS to help it to recover from the pandemic so that, over the next three years, waiting lists will fall and outcomes for cancer treatment will improve. We will continue to support primary care, and we will invest more in general practice, especially in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. We will improve mental health and welfare support, and we will secure better access to NHS dentistry.

We are also committed to improving social care services and to reducing delayed discharges. I know well the workforce challenges that the adult social care sector, in particular, faces. That is why I will commit to a timetable that sets out how this Government will get to £10 an hour for adult social care workers. Although we are not able to afford to do that immediately, I want to send a signal to the sector that we are absolutely serious about improving pay and terms and conditions for those who care for our most vulnerable people.

A key way of improving consistency of care is through the national care service, in a way that commands consensus among our key partners, including trade unions and local government. Yesterday, I confirmed that we would seek from Parliament an extension to the scrutiny process for the proposed legislation, to help us to build that consensus. The national care service legislation's aim of ensuring consistently high standards of care across the country attracts wide support. My hope is that we can, by taking slightly more time to agree a way forward, ensure that we achieve that aim.

We will also continue to ensure that staff in our health and care services are valued and fairly paid. As things stand, Scotland is the only part of the UK in which no NHS worker has gone on strike during the past year. I am proud of and grateful for that. The Scottish Government will soon enter talks with junior doctors in the hope of arriving at a fair settlement for them.

As well as supporting our NHS and care services, we will continue to invest in other key public services. In the justice system, the backlog of court cases that was caused by the pandemic is already decreasing and will continue to fall over the next three years. We will continue to implement important improvements in our justice system, such as better handling of cases involving sexual offences.

We will improve childcare for school-age children, and I will accelerate the expansion of childcare for 1 and 2-year-olds. We will continue to focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap in schools while raising attainment for all, and we will improve the experiences and outcomes of children, young people and their families who use and need additional support for learning.

As part of our efforts to improve school education, we will increase the availability of internationally comparable data on Scotland's education performance. Scotland already participates in the widely respected programme for international student assessment, and we will apply to rejoin two other major international statistics systems—the trends in international maths and science study, and the progress in international reading literacy study.

We will also make our public transport system more accessible, available and affordable. As an important part of that, I can confirm today that the six-month pilot to remove peak-time fares from ScotRail services will start in October. The evidence from the pilot and our wider fair fares review will allow us, from next year onwards, to bring forward further targeted measures to ensure that the costs of transport are more fairly shared.

As part of our commitment to active travel, we will also ensure that we increase our investment to deliver more places where people can walk, wheel and cycle safely for day-to-day journeys.

We will double the size of the charge-point network for electric vehicles to at least 6,000, and we will increase the number of zero-emission buses on Scotland's roads. We will also deliver six new major vessels to serve Scotland's ferry network.

My final point is that local government is a vital partner in delivering the services that we all rely on. We therefore intend to agree and implement a new deal for local government to help us to work together more effectively. Part of that is about giving local authorities far more discretion on sources of funding. As we have previously confirmed, subject to Parliament's approval we will legislate to give councils the power to apply a local visitor levy on overnight stays. We also launched a consultation yesterday on measures that will give local authorities additional powers to increase the

rate of council tax on second and empty properties. The consultation also seeks views on altering the thresholds for self-catering accommodation to qualify for non-domestic rates. That consultation has come about as a result of effective joint working between the Scottish Government and local government, and I hope that it demonstrates to local authorities that we see them as essential partners in helping us to achieve our ambitions for Scotland in the years ahead.

When I was elected as party leader, I promised that I would never pretend that government is easy—it is not—and that I would not offer empty promises in the face of difficult challenges. The document that we are publishing today sets out our determination to honour that commitment. It is built on the idea of working in partnership with business, trade unions, local government, our third sector and our Green Party colleagues in the Government. It recognises the financial constraints under which we operate, and it is realistic about the social, economic and environmental challenges that we face, but that realism is balanced by optimism about our ability to meet those challenges.

Scotland is a land of opportunity. I am proud of that fact and proud to be a product of that. My grandparents came to the country in the 1960s, barely speaking English and with little money in their pockets. Despite the challenges that they faced, and despite the hostility that they faced at times due to their background, they overcame those barriers and provided a life for their children and grandchildren for which I will forever be grateful. It is my responsibility as First Minister to ensure that every family in Scotland has such equality of opportunity, regardless of their background or where in Scotland they live. I am optimistic that we can achieve that equality of opportunity.

The three missions that I have set out today will determine the priorities of the Government that I lead for the rest of this parliamentary session, and will help us to achieve them. Together, we will focus on delivery and ensure that we have in place affordable and ambitious measures to protect our environment, to protect business prosperity, to improve people's wellbeing and to reduce poverty. The measures will ensure that the actions that we take in the next three years will stand Scotland in good stead for the next decade, and will use our current significant strengths to deliver a fresh start for Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. Members who wish to

ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):**

The First Minister has made his statement today as scandal continues to engulf his party. The Scottish National Party is in total meltdown. Its former chief executive and current treasurer have been arrested amid a police investigation into the party's finances and leaked footage has shown Nicola Sturgeon trying to shut down scrutiny mere months before that investigation began, but Humza Yousaf it is so indebted to his former mentors that he will not do the right thing and suspend them while the investigation is on-going. It is past time for Humza Yousaf to tackle that scandal head on and prove to the Scottish public that he is his own man, instead of defending and deflecting from his predecessors' tarnished legacy.

I turn to the substance of Humza Yousaf's statement. We welcome the decision to U-turn on 13 years of SNP education policy by rejoining international school league tables. We hope that that will be just the beginning of a wholesale re-evaluation of how this Government has devalued Scottish education during its time in office.

However, as a whole, Humza Yousaf's proposals do nothing to dispel the notion that he is a continuity First Minister leading a continuity Government. He is tinkering with Nicola Sturgeon's failing policy agenda and continues to be led by the extremist Greens, instead of delivering the fresh leadership that Scotland needs right now. It will dismay the majority of the Scottish public to know that campaigning for independence is the top priority for Humza Yousaf. At a time when Scotland needs national leadership that focuses on tackling the big challenges we all face—a global cost of living crisis, an NHS that is on its knees thanks to this First Minister and a sluggish economy—we have a nationalist leader appealing to his hopelessly divided party.

I ask the First Minister, based on the commitments that he makes in his threadbare document, whether anyone seriously believes that this Government will close the attainment gap by the end of this session of Parliament?

Secondly, we welcome the delay to the deposit return scheme that is a humiliation to the Green minister Lorna Slater. Can the First Minister promise that this Scottish Government will engage with businesses regarding the deposit return scheme, which it has failed to do so far?

Finally, given the scandal engulfing his party, can the First Minister tell me whether the SNP remains in debt to Peter Murrell and when it intends to repay that loan?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** First Minister, I ask you to respond to the questions that fall within your first ministerial responsibilities.

**The First Minister:** I will talk about the issues that I think are important to the people of Scotland. I say to Meghan Gallacher that it is awfully brave of her to talk about a global cost of living crisis. We are dealing with a Tory Westminster cost of living crisis. That is why the most recent IMF projections show that the UK Government is an outlier, with the lowest growth of any G7 economy. That is a Tory cost of living crisis and is a union dividend that Scotland definitely does not need. Ms Gallacher should own that, rather than trying to deflect us away from that.

We have listened to Scottish business, and Lorna Slater will give further updates on the package of measures and the deposit return scheme that we are bringing forward. Let us be honest about this. All of us talk about the need to tackle the climate emergency, but we are the ones—*[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Excuse me a second, First Minister.

We need to hear the First Minister respond to the questions that Ms Gallacher raised.

**The First Minister:** We are the ones who not only talk the talk; we are prepared to walk the walk. Every time we bring forward a measure on the climate emergency, the Conservatives are the first to oppose it, time and again. They are not serious at all about tackling the climate emergency. We will continue to talk and engage, not just with business but with the Scottish public, about their priorities. It is brave of Meghan Gallacher—some may use another word for it—to talk of propriety. Her Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and former Prime Minister are all under investigation by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Although we absolutely face challenges, I would rather be standing here, with the opportunity to deliver for the people of Scotland, than languishing in opposition like Meghan Gallacher and the Scottish Tories.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** If members continue to make such noise, we will not be able to hear any of the answers, and that would be unfortunate.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Some of the announcements in the First Minister's statement are welcome, and some of them are undoubtedly well intentioned, but many of them are rehashed promises from the past that have never been delivered. Humza Yousaf cannot escape from the fact that he is not now running a functioning Government. The SNP is mired in scandal and division, and its members are talking to themselves about themselves. The crisis that now

engulfs SNP members is an indication not just of how they govern their party but of how they govern our country. It is a 16-year culture of command and control, of financial mismanagement and of a lack of transparency, which has meant secrecy and cover-ups, often with devastating consequences. No amount of spin or the pretence of a reset or fresh start will hide what is becoming clearer to the public every single day. Our country is now crying out for leadership, for hope, for new ideas and for a new vision to confront the twin crises that our nation faces: a cost of living crisis, with families struggling to pay the bills, and an NHS crisis, with patients struggling to access life-saving treatment.

Continuity will not cut it. Incompetence has consequences. Frankly, Scotland deserves better. It does not need to be like this, however. This is not as good as it gets. Change is possible. We can have a Government that tackles the cost of living crisis and brings down bills; we can have a Government that grows the economy and invests in the opportunities of the future; we can have a Government that can restore and renew our NHS; and we can have a Government that puts the people's priorities first. After just three weeks in office, is it not already clear that it cannot be this First Minister or this SNP Government?

**The First Minister:** Goodness—not a single idea, not a single proposal and not a single bit of understanding of the policy perspectives. That was completely vacuous from the master of the soundbite, with no substance at all. It is all style and no substance whatever from Anas Sarwar. He is vacuous and completely devoid of any policy proposals of his own.

Anas Sarwar says that, in the past 16 years, the Scottish Government has not achieved anything. What we have achieved includes the game-changing Scottish child payment, which has helped 385,000 children under the age of 16, who are now eligible. We have established new public services, including Social Security Scotland, which is based on fairness, dignity and respect and is delivering 13 benefits, seven of which are available only here in Scotland.

We have delivered the baby box. We have abolished tuition fees—of course, the back-door tuition fees were brought in by the Scottish Labour Party. We have abolished prescription charges. We have made sure that personal and nursing care are free for all. We now have free bus travel for more than 2 million people: those who are under 22, people with disabilities and those over the age of 60. We have built 118,000 affordable homes. We have funded childcare: we have here in Scotland the most generous offer of childcare of anywhere in the UK.

The difference between Anas Sarwar and I is that, when it comes to the Tory cost of living crisis, he wants to keep the powers in the hands of the Conservatives; I want to ensure that this Parliament has all the financial and economic levers to tackle that crisis.

In addition, Anas Sarwar says that the people of Scotland are crying out for change. We do not need the replacement of one Tory Government with a pale imitation of a Tory Government with Keir Starmer. Even Anas Sarwar must be embarrassed—as, I know certainly, Richard Leonard will be—by Keir Starmer's appealing to the right with his anti-refugee and anti-immigration rhetoric, and inability to stand up for the most marginalised people. Only with the powers of independence will we get rid of Tory Governments in Scotland for good.

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** During Scottish apprenticeship week, colleagues from across the chamber will have heard directly from apprentices about the high-quality learning and work experience that they receive. The First Minister will appreciate that apprenticeships also support economic renewal locally and nationally. When will Skills Development Scotland issue contracts for 2023-24 new starts, to enable local training providers to clear the backlog of folk who are waiting and to allow new-start learners to begin their journeys to quality jobs on those excellent workplace learning programmes?

**The First Minister:** I pay credit to Ruth Maguire, who has raised this issue on a number of occasions. Modern apprentices are a vital resource for employers to invest in their workforce. All of us have seen that in our home constituencies.

Investing in skills across people's lifetimes is critical to our future productivity in delivering a fair, green and growing economy. My priority is for high-quality apprenticeships that provide sustainable jobs and careers, supporting our transition to net zero. SDS has already issued contracts for the 39,000 modern apprentices who are currently in training, and I expect it to finalise contracts for new modern apprenticeship starts in the next few days.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** What detailed analysis has been undertaken by the new Government on the question of progressively increasing tax rates for middle and higher earners—a policy that has been proved in the past to reduce economic activity and weaken the tax take? What analysis has the First Minister undertaken in order to ensure that that is not going to happen under his Scottish Government? That will have important implications for how we address the deficit that is projected by the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

**The First Minister:** Detailed analysis is undertaken whenever we make tax changes.

I completely understand the point that Liz Smith has raised on tax divergence, for example, which is an important factor in such an analysis. However, I am unapologetic in saying that I believe that those who earn the most—such as Liz Smith, other members of the Parliament and I—should pay more. We earn more, therefore we should pay more. *[Interruption.]* I hear Sue Webber disagreeing with that. Of course, she was the MSP who, privately, said that NHS workers should take a 20 per cent pay cut, in a scheme that she described as “salary sacrifice”, so I am not sure that I will take financial advice from her.

Our policy of progressive taxation, which was announced in the budget by the former Deputy First Minister, has allowed us to invest £1 billion in our NHS.

Detailed analysis is undertaken. Of course, if I had listened to Liz Smith—or indeed to Douglas Ross—and did what she asked us to do, which was to replicate the disastrous tax cuts for the wealthy that Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng put forward, it would have meant that, instead of having £1 billion extra to spend, our budget would have been cut by £500 million. That is why I am not sure that I will take advice on economic literacy from the Conservatives.

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Scotland can be proud of its global reputation as an open and outward-looking country, and the recent tartan week in New York was an incredible celebration of our nation on the world stage.

That makes James Cleverly's latest intervention on our overseas meetings seem all the more insecure and desperate. Scottish ministers have a clear responsibility to promote Scotland internationally. In the face of Westminster's latest attempts to undermine our devolution, will the First Minister reaffirm his Government's commitment to championing Scotland on the world stage?

**The First Minister:** Absolutely. Of course, the Scottish Conservatives never even wanted the creation of this Scottish Parliament, so it is hardly a surprise that they are chipping away to try to undermine devolution with every chance that they get.

I absolutely reaffirm my intention and that of the Government that I lead—our intention—to promote Scotland on the world stage. The UK Government continues to deny the mandate from the people for a referendum on independence, and to encroach on devolution. Since Brexit, we have seen nine breaches of the Sewel convention; the imposition of the UK Internal Market Act 2020; the vetoing of legislation on gender recognition that was passed

by a majority in this Parliament; and the threat to give UK ministers powers to amend or scrap vital European Union law in devolved areas.

Our international external engagement, which is often done through very good collaboration with UK embassies around the world, is to the benefit of our Scottish food and drink industry; our tourism sector; our excellent higher and further education sectors; our life science and technology sectors; and our renewables sector. I am also thinking of the excellent transformative life-saving work that is done by our international development teams through our people-to-people relationship with Malawi.

Why on earth would the UK Government want to try to put a stop to that? We know why—it is because it is hell bent on undermining devolution. While I am First Minister, I will do everything that I possibly can to stop it from doing that.

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** Hundreds of Scots are struggling more than ever, and they need this Government to focus on their priorities. Child poverty has remained at 24 per cent for the entire time that the SNP has been in government, and levels of severe child poverty have been rising.

The First Minister has been a member of the Scottish Government for more than a decade and he has, in various guises, failed to use the powers of this Parliament effectively to address the rising levels of very deep poverty.

The First Minister has defined himself as a continuity candidate—ain’t that the truth. Is this prospectus not just more of the same? Where are the new financial measures? How much of this is new money? How much of his £1.3 billion for the child payment is new money? Is it not clear that Scotland needs more than just a summit on poverty—it needs action? Does he not realise that continuity will not cut it?

**The First Minister:** I can see that that got a rapturous response from Paul O’Kane’s own back benchers, and quite rightly so. What was the first action that I took when I became First Minister? I made sure that we did not simply double, but tripled, the fuel insecurity fund. I made sure that we invested £25 million of additional funding for our just transition in the north-east, because I am going to take the workers of the north-east with us on the just transition journey.

I made sure that we invested in school-age childcare, for which I announced £15 million, targeted at the lowest-income households in the country. I made sure that there was additional money for deep-end surgeries, which are the general practices that are located in areas of highest deprivation. That is where my focus, and the focus of this Government, is.

I say to Paul O’Kane that he and I do not differ in our views on the need to go further in reducing and tackling child poverty. However, we should not forget that we are doing that with one hand tied behind our back, and unfortunately he wants to keep that hand tied. The financial levers and the levers over employment and the economy—the substantial levers—are still held by a Conservative Government.

Where we have powers, we must go further, and I am absolutely happy to commit to that. When it comes to taxation—for example, how we redistribute wealth more evenly—I am committed to doing that.

That is why I made sure that we invited the Opposition parties to the anti-poverty summit that the member dismisses. I hope that he will not dismiss that invitation. I hope that he—and, indeed, Anas Sarwar—will come to that summit, because where there are genuinely good ideas, I will make sure that we as a Government listen to them, and that we progress them together.

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** How will Scottish Government policies account for the needs of and challenges faced by rural and island communities?

**The First Minister:** There is no doubt that the three driving missions of opportunity, equality and community are vital to everyone, no matter where they live. Whether they live in rural, island or urban Scotland, everyone will benefit from the actions that are taken to tackle poverty, cope with the cost of living crisis and support and strengthen our vital public services.

We will ensure that we take a tailored approach, taking full account of regional circumstances and working closely with our partners in rural and island areas. For example, I am focused on housing in rural areas through the announcement that I have already made in relation to the £25 million fund for affordable homes for those who need them, including key workers. We are also consulting on giving councils powers to raise council tax on second and long-term empty properties, which will help many parts of Scotland, but particularly our rural and island communities. We will also publish a rural delivery plan setting out the actions that this Government is taking to support our rural and island communities.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Everyone, including those SNP back benchers otherwise engaged today, knows that this First Minister’s relaunch has been utterly torpedoed. While he is focused on the turmoil in his own party, NHS waiting times are still being missed, more ferries are breaking down and record amounts of sewage are being dumped into

Scotland's rivers. This is a Government in total paralysis.

For those reasonable-minded people finally rethinking their support for the SNP, there is an alternative. Scottish Liberal Democrats will be part of the change that is coming. *[Interruption.]* There is nervous laughter coming from the SNP benches, but they know that it is true—*[Interruption.]* They know that their vote is slipping away from them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I cannot hear Mr Cole-Hamilton's question. Can we hear Mr Cole-Hamilton, please?

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** I am surprised that you can hear me over the sound of CVs being frantically updated from the Government benches.

I would like to ask the First Minister a question if I may, Presiding Officer. When he was health secretary, Humza Yousaf personally promised to clear down the atrocious mental health waiting lists by this March—March 2023. That came and went; it was an utter failure. How many more years will it be before people are treated on time?

**The First Minister:** Yesterday, I had the great pleasure of visiting Street Soccer at the Change Centre in Dundee. They managed to rope me into a game of six-a-side with the excellent folk who are involved in engaging with Street Soccer. That game of six-a-side made me think that Alex Cole-Hamilton and his Liberal Democrats could not even field a team with the four Liberal Democrat MSPs that he has. *[Interruption.]* Oh—he is getting defence from his Conservative colleagues. There is a surprise—they are former coalition partners. I would be careful of boasting with too much confidence about the support that Alex Cole-Hamilton and the Liberal Democrats have here in Scotland.

I say to Alex Cole-Hamilton that the Government is absolutely focused on the issue that he raises. One of our significant priorities is to tackle those far-too-long waits with regard to mental health services, and child and adolescent mental health services in particular. We are making progress. Overall, CAMHS waiting lists have decreased by more than 9 per cent since the last quarter, which is a reduction of 777. The number of children waiting more than 18 weeks has decreased by more than 30 per cent since the last quarter. The number of children waiting more than 52 weeks decreased by more than 40 per cent since the last quarter.

Crucially, the number of children who are starting treatment from CAMHS in this quarter is the highest on record. We are seeing more and more young people, but that is not to take away from the very important points that Alex Cole-Hamilton raised. We are committed to increasing

the workforce in CAMHS, and we have seen it continue to increase, but I take his points about mental health very seriously and this Government will be focused on that challenge.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** At the SNP leadership hustings hosted by the excellent *Inverness Courier* and *Highland News* media group, the First Minister was asked whether he supported the dualling of the A9 from Perth to Inverness in total and the dualling of the A96 from Inverness to Auldearn, including the Nairn bypass. The First Minister gave very welcome commitments—welcome because they were entirely unequivocal. He said that that will happen and—I very much welcome this—that the capital will be found. When will that excellent news be the subject of a detailed ministerial statement? Given that we have been treading water for two years, will that be before the summer recess?

**The First Minister:** I spotted Fergus Ewing during the leadership hustings hosted by the excellent *Inverness Courier*. I give him an absolute assurance that we remain committed to the dualling of the A9. That commitment remains absolute and we have invested more than £430 million to date.

Of course, I can understand completely the disappointment around the Tomatin to Moy section and we are targeting a contract award before the end of 2023. I am engaged with Transport Scotland to see whether that can be brought forward in any way, shape or form, but I know that Fergus Ewing understands our obligations regarding public finance and spending.

On the remaining six sections, an updated timescale will be provided in autumn this year, but I heard Fergus Ewing ask whether we can bring that timetable before the summer recess, so I will take that away for consideration.

We remain committed not just to improving the A96 but, importantly, to dualling the Inverness to Nairn section, including the Nairn bypass, and we will complete the statutory process for that as soon as we can.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** This Government's reckless plans to ban fishing in large parts of Scotland's seas have been conveniently omitted from today's statement. Plans drawn up and explicitly listed in the SNP's deal with the Greens have provoked an outcry from coastal communities, the fishing industry, islanders and anyone who cares about Scotland's economy.

Meanwhile, Scotland's farmers remain in the dark over SNP plans for future funding, despite rolling tractors on the Parliament's lawn just a few months ago.

With details as thin as gruel, this latest policy prospectus is more of the same from a Government that remains out of touch with the priorities of rural Scotland. There is no mention of farmers, no mention of fishing, no mention of agriculture and one mention of rural. Will the First Minister listen to rural and coastal communities and drop the reckless highly protected marine area proposals, and will he urgently deliver a new agriculture bill that supports rural Scotland?

**The First Minister:** This Government has an excellent track record when it comes to working with our rural communities, and particularly our farming communities. *[Interruption.]* Rachael Hamilton can laugh all she wants. What is not a laughing matter is the hard Brexit that her party has imposed, which has harmed rural Scotland up and down the country.

What I would say on the important issue of highly protected marine areas is that I have heard and have listened—and we will listen—to the concerns of our coastal, island and fishing communities. The consultation closed yesterday, and no criteria have been decided or sites selected. We will analyse the consultation results. I spoke this morning to Màiri McAllan, and she and the Government will engage with those coastal and fishing communities to hear from them.

A very basic principle that we have always operated by, which I reaffirm today, is that we will not impose these policies on communities that do not want them, so we will work constructively with those communities.

Let me go back to the point that I was making to Meghan Gallacher. Let us not forget that we are facing the twin crises of the climate emergency and nature and biodiversity loss. Every time we propose something, the Conservatives oppose it. It is important that the difficult decisions that we make get as much consensus in the Parliament as possible. Only by taking really difficult decisions will we tackle those twin crises.

I hear what a number of our fishing and island communities are saying. Of course, it is an area that is important to the Government and our Green colleagues. I know that we are in absolute agreement that we will work with our coastal and fishing communities to see whether we can find a way forward together.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I call the next member, I advise that time is marching on a bit. I am keen to take as many members as possible, as obviously there are many important issues to be raised and responded to, so I would appreciate succinct questions and answers to match, First Minister.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** The First Minister is, unlike his opponents,

who want most decisions to be taken by our next-door neighbour, rightly ambitious for Scotland. However, to secure a Scotland in which most decisions are not taken by our next-door neighbour, we need a growing, thriving and productive economy. Is that possible when workers who earn £43,663 to £50,270 a year pay 54 per cent of that marginal rate in income tax and national insurance, with VAT, fuel and excise duties eating into the rest? Does the First Minister accept the Scottish Fiscal Commission's view that high rates of marginal tax impact Scotland's productivity, inhibit growth and diminish the resources that are available to tackle poverty and deliver prosperity?

**The First Minister:** Kenny Gibson has raised an exceptionally important point. I know why groaning came from the Conservatives—that is because they are, of course, in charge of the majority of the economic and financial levers, unfortunately. My disappointment is not with the Conservatives—I expect them to moan and groan any time somebody who is wealthy has to pay more. My concern is more about the Labour Party, which wants to keep those financial and fiscal levers in the hands of the Conservatives. I cannot understand that.

Yes, we will continue to work with business where we can, and we will continue to ensure that we not only bring forward progressive taxation but, where possible, distribute and redistribute Scotland's wealth more evenly.

I go back to a point that I made to Liz Smith. We will, of course, always ensure that there is robust analysis behind any of our spend or tax decisions but, my goodness, there would be a much easier task if we had the full powers of independence so that the levers were in our hands rather than those of the UK Government, which is hell-bent on giving tax cuts only to the wealthiest.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** When it comes to business and the economy, the most remarkable thing about the First Minister's statement was that it scrapped and U-turned on more initiatives than it created or set up. Indeed, the document is merely bland postures and platitudes. Who is going to object to growing jobs, generating higher wages or creating more businesses other than perhaps the Green ministers, who do not believe in growth? There are no measures, there is no quantum and there is no criterion of success. How many businesses will be created by 2026? What new training and support measures will be put in place to help people into higher-wage work? What reform of the cluttered landscape of enterprise support agencies will be undertaken? Overall, if the First Minister is so clear that there needs to be a new deal for business, what was wrong with the old deal?

**The First Minister:** This is about new leadership and the ability for a fresh start to build on the successes that the Government has had. Just think of the many businesses—the thousands or tens of thousands of businesses; in fact, even more businesses than that—that would not have survived the global pandemic if it were not for the measures that we had put in place before the pandemic such as the small business bonus scheme. We have worked incredibly hard with business over the years, and I listen to business when it wants a reset of the relationship. That is why we will take longer on the launch of the DRS, for example. That is about listening to business. I am certain that, if I had said that we would go live in August, I would have been castigated by the Opposition for that. I am afraid that there is, I suspect, no way in which I will be able to appease Daniel Johnson, despite my very best efforts.

On the points that I agree with Daniel Johnson on, his point on reforming what he calls “the cluttered landscape” of agencies is worthy of attention. The Government is collectively looking at that.

On the prospectus itself, there is a clear set of outcomes on whose delivery the Opposition and the Scottish public can hold us to account. We have promised to report on those outcomes annually. I am sure that Daniel Johnson will take great joy in holding the Government to account in that regard.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** For years now, the UK Government has failed to reach a decision on excluding Scotland’s bottle deposit return scheme from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, and it now very much looks like it has deliberately generated uncertainty to undermine the scheme, up to and including Alister Jack misleading the House of Commons. That is Westminster’s delay, but can the First Minister say what he and the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity will do to secure—*[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, Mr Greer. We need to hear Mr Greer’s question. A brief question would be appreciated. Thank you.

**Ross Greer:** Can the First Minister say what he and the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity will do to secure the exclusion and ensure that Scotland’s scheme goes ahead next March?

**The First Minister:** It is no surprise that the Scottish Tories do not understand devolution. There is no doubt whatsoever that not providing the exemption under the internal market act is an existential matter for the deposit return scheme. We cannot progress the scheme without an

exemption under the act, which far overreaches issues of devolution.

I am absolutely committed to the deposit return scheme, which will reduce littering substantially—by a third. It will increase the recycling rate of single-use drinks containers towards 90 per cent and cut emissions by 4 million tonnes over 25 years, which is the equivalent of taking 83,000 cars off the road. The scheme has already delivered hundreds of millions of pounds of investment across Scotland and it will create more than 500 new green jobs.

We need the UK Government exclusion from the internal market act, and we will do everything in our power to achieve that. Some UK Government departments, such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, support an exemption, but we know that Alister Jack will do everything that he possibly can to undermine the Scottish Parliament and devolution. We will continue to do what we can, but it would help if those who say that they support the deposit return scheme got behind the Scottish Government and persuaded the UK Government to do the right thing and allow the scheme to go ahead next year.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I very much welcome what the First Minister said about being bolder on taxation and redistribution of wealth. Will he say more about the second and empty homes council tax initiative and about whether we can replace council tax in the longer term?

**The First Minister:** I have announced a joint consultation with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on changes to council tax, because we can possibly go further. I am really up for that discussion. The Scottish Trades Union Congress published an excellent report in December or towards the tail end of last year that made a number of policy suggestions that are worthy of consideration by the Government. Many involved reforming council tax, but alternatives to council tax were also discussed.

Scotland has led the way in delivering affordable housing across the country—for example, between 2018 and 2022, 59 per cent more affordable homes were delivered per head of population in Scotland than in England. I am keen to look at what we can do within current council tax structures, but I certainly would not rule out further reform of council tax. We could also look at the alternatives to council tax, because we know that we can do better.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** A priority for the Scottish people is the recovery of our NHS and its sustainability for the future, rather than the continuity with the Sturgeon era that is being

offered. The previous First Minister has left a woeful record in health. Primary care is where almost all healthcare is delivered, and the Maryhill group practice in Elgin sent me a copy of its letter to the new Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, which highlights the growing threat of financial instability for general practices. Practices are already short staffed and under pressure. The SNP's £65 million cut from the primary care budget affects everyone and is undermining general practice. Will the First Minister commit to reinstating the £65 million to protect general practice and the NHS's future?

**The First Minister:** When I spoke about social care issues, I said that there can be no NHS recovery without a social care recovery. Forgive me if I said that we would commit to a timetable to get to wages of £10 an hour; I meant £12 an hour. I believe that that figure will help with the workforce challenges that are being faced in adult social care in particular. I give Sandesh Gulhane the absolute commitment that we believe that a social care recovery is vital to our NHS recovery.

What is also vital to an NHS recovery is not having NHS staff feeling that they have no choice but to go on strike, as they have done time and again in Conservative-led England. Staff have done that because the Conservatives do not value our NHS staff in the way that the Scottish Government does. That is why our NHS staff remain the best paid, in comparison with those anywhere else in the UK. We will engage meaningfully—the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care will do that with junior doctors later this week—and I hope that we will get to a point where we can prevent industrial action.

We will continue to invest in primary care. It is fair to say that we have a record number of general practitioners in Scotland. There are more GPs per head of population here than there are in the rest of the UK: our 95 GPs for every 100,000 people in Scotland compares with 79 GPs for every 100,000 people in England. We are committed to further increasing the number of GPs in Scotland by 800 by the end of 2027.

To answer the member's question directly, we are committed to investing an additional £1 billion in our NHS. That is possible only because we did not listen to the Conservatives' advice that we should give tax cuts to the wealthiest, which would have meant £500 million less to spend in the Scottish Government's budget.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We must have succinct questions and, First Minister, succinct answers, otherwise I will have to cut the number of people who ask a question. I would like to get in as many members as I possibly can.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** The First Minister will be aware of the many challenges that we have across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, including the need for investment in roads and rail infrastructure so that we can keep young folk and attract businesses to those regions. Will the First Minister give a commitment that this Government will pay attention to the needs of Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders? Will he advance the strategic transport projects review 2? Will he show that those regions are not forgotten, because we in the south are crucial to Scotland's future, and to our economy, culture and—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Harper. That is not brief.

**Emma Harper:** Sorry.

**The First Minister:** In the interests of brevity, I say that I will commit to that. Of course, important improvements to the A77 and A75 are part of STPR2. We will ensure that we make progress on those.

The South of Scotland Enterprise's £34.5 million budget will also improve business and community resilience. It will help to protect and, crucially, create jobs. That sits alongside the £85 million that we are investing in the Borderlands inclusive growth deal. I will do everything that I can to ensure that this Government meets the needs of the people of the south of Scotland.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** This Government has had 16 years to get childcare right, but parents still struggle. They find childcare to be inflexible and does not wrap around their lives. What is available is there only for some kids of certain ages. That drives inequality, holds back opportunity and fails communities.

I welcomed Humza Yousaf's commitment during the leadership campaign to deliver free childcare for one and two-year-olds. Today's plan talks only of developing that childcare, not of delivering it. This new Government has promised ambition, but we are yet to see it. There is a difference between being developed—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I need a question, please.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** —and being delivered. Will the First Minister promise people who become parents over the next year that their child will have access to free childcare by the time that they turn one?

**The First Minister:** I made it very clear during the election contest to which Pam Duncan-Glancy referred that we would accelerate the expansion of childcare to one and two-year-olds. That continues to be this Government's priority.

I will demonstrate just how important a priority childcare is to me and the Government that I lead: one of my first announcements was an investment of £15 million to increase school-age childcare for those in the lowest-income households. I am absolutely committed to that.

The point that I take from Pam Duncan-Glancy's question is that we must work with the sector, because we know that there are challenges around what it perceives to be equitable funding—or the need for more equitable funding—in relation to childcare costs. I am happy to engage—I will be engaging—with the sector directly.

I remain committed to the promises that I made during the election contest to accelerate the expansion of childcare for one and two-year-olds.

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. Supporting mental health and the wellbeing of children and young people is crucial to achieving the Government's ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. What will the Government do to ensure that children and young people's mental health and wellbeing are supported?

**The First Minister:** We will focus on ensuring that young people in particular get timely access to the mental health treatment that they most definitely need. I gave some examples of where we are making progress, earlier—I think that was in response to Alex Cole-Hamilton's question. In addition, we will continue to invest in child and adolescent mental health services support staff.

Furthermore, the Government and I am committed to investing in pre-crisis interventions. We know that CAMHS does an excellent job, and that those who work in the service do an excellent job. However, we also know how useful and beneficial it can be to young people if we can invest in earlier—pre-crisis—intervention.

Clare Haughey knows this area very well. She should be in no doubt whatsoever of this Government's firm commitment to mental health, to bringing down waiting lists and to reducing backlogs, particularly for our young people

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** On 28 February, Lorna Slater said that

"no one with any credibility would delay"

the deposit return scheme. Given that the First Minister has just done that, was she right?

**The First Minister:** Of course, we know that the UK Government's failure to grant an exemption from the provisions of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 is existential for the deposit return scheme.

In answer to the member's question, no, the UK Government is not credible and never will be credible, which is why the Conservatives have been thrashed in every election in Scotland for more than half a century.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can squeeze in Mr Fairlie if he asks a brief question and the First Minister gives a succinct answer.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Yesterday, I was at Letham Climate Challenge's swap shop in Letham, where I was born, in my constituency. It helps people who are in desperate need of the most basic things, such as furniture, bed linen, clothes, crockery, cups and cutlery. The demand for the shop's services is now so great that the manager has asked me to help her to find more volunteers. The increase in demand is a direct result of the policies of the Conservative Party on that side of the chamber, which is now being ably helped by the Labour Party on the other side.

Rather than independence being a distraction, as claimed by the unionist parties, does the First Minister agree that, now more than ever, it is an absolute imperative to ensure that this country can be governed in a way that makes Tory food banks and climate change swap shops things of the past?

**The First Minister:** I absolutely agree with what my colleague Jim Fairlie has said. As I have set out today, independence is essential. We cannot afford to be in this unequal union a day longer. What has it resulted in? It has resulted in a cost crisis, in a hard Brexit—which is now supported by the Labour Party, too—in a policy under which we turn back refugees who are in need, and in policies that have led to the UK's economic growth lagging behind that of every other major G7 economy.

I absolutely agree with Jim Fairlie that, with the powers of independence, we will build a wealthier, fairer, greener and more equal country, and I will be doing everything that I can to ensure that this country achieves independence sooner rather than later.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the First Minister's statement.

**Sandesh Gulhane:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Following my question, I declare an interest as a working GP in the NHS.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Dr Gulhane. That will be noted on the record.

## Cost of Living and Child Poverty

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty. I call the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion.

15:33

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** Addressing the cost of living crisis, tackling poverty and working towards our statutory targets to reduce child poverty are central to the Government's priorities. They are central not just for me, as the new Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, but for the First Minister and all my Cabinet colleagues. That is, of course, reinforced in the policy prospectus that has been published and has just been discussed. The prospectus confirms that equality, opportunity and community will be the three critical and interdependent missions for the Government in 2026.

That is why, in his first days in the job, the First Minister focused on delivering for the people of Scotland by providing £15 million of funding to help low-income households with childcare, tripling our fuel insecurity fund to £30 million and announcing additional funding for our national health service to tackle health inequalities in our healthcare system.

The poverty and income inequality statistics that were published last month show that poverty levels remain too high. Although, in Scotland, they continue to be lower than the United Kingdom average, with relative child poverty six percentage points below that for the UK as a whole, they must be reduced further.

Of course, the analysis that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published today on rises in deep poverty further reinforced the devastating impact of the United Kingdom Government's decade of austerity, welfare cuts and economic mismanagement. Analysis that the Scottish Government published last year highlighted that, were key welfare reforms introduced by the UK Government since 2015 to be reversed, that would lift an estimated 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty this year.

Household finances are under strain, with soaring energy bills and food costs disproportionately hurting those on the lowest incomes. High inflation is heaping more pressure on to our public services, with the Scottish Government's block grant being 4.8 per cent lower than it was in 2021-22. However, the Scottish

Government recognises the pressure on household budgets, which is why last year and this we have allocated almost £3 billion to support policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible during the on-going cost of living crisis.

I know what a challenge reducing poverty is, particularly without the full powers of a normal Government, but we will ensure that we use all the powers that we have to tackle poverty and inequality, build a fairer Scotland and support those who are most in need during the cost of living crisis, and we will build the case for further powers so that we can have all the levers that we need to tackle the deep-seated and multigenerational child poverty that has blighted our country.

The second tackling child poverty delivery plan, "Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026", reaffirms our sharp focus on working with partners to support those who are at greatest risk of poverty, with 90 per cent of all children in poverty in Scotland living in the six priority families that were identified in our first plan. The second plan commits to wide-ranging and ambitious action to provide immediate support to families and deliver the transformational change that is needed in the longer term to break the cycle of child poverty that we have.

One clear example is the significant investment and increased support that we provide to families through Scottish Government benefits. Twelve of those benefits were upgraded by 10.1 per cent this month. Over 2022, the Scottish child payment, which is the only tackling-child-poverty benefit in the UK, was increased from £10 to £25 per week per child and extended to eligible children under 16. That represents an increase of 150 per cent in less than eight months and, in its first full year, it will be an investment of £442 million.

The Scottish Government has had to make hard choices and decisions with a limited budget and in some of the toughest financial circumstances imaginable. We have taken the political decision to prioritise increasing the child payment because it is a vital tool in tackling child poverty. The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that around 387,000 children will be eligible for the payment in 2023-24 and, based on modelling from March 2022, it is estimated that the payment will lift 50,000 children out of poverty this year.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new role and I look forward to working with her.

I absolutely agree with what she has said, but I am still being contacted by constituents who have not been able to get the child payment, due to the lack of resources in Social Security Scotland. Will

she at least investigate that to find out why payments are not being made and why big delays are still happening, not only with the child payment but with the best start grant and other benefits, which are taking longer to be paid than they should?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** It is a pleasure to work with Jeremy Balfour again. It is like the good old days, when I had responsibility for social security previously, and I am sure that we will pick up on some of those discussions.

He raises an important point about the challenges that Social Security Scotland has had following the expansion of the Scottish child payment. Of course, we have undertaken a massive expansion to ensure that everybody under 16 is included. The backlogs are being dealt with, and I have already had discussions with Social Security Scotland, which has reassured me that work is continuing on that. However, I am happy to have further discussions with Mr Balfour on the issue, because we all want the benefit to be a success and to get to people as soon as possible. I reassure him that the issue already has my attention and that of Social Security Scotland.

Our five family payments, which include the child payment, together with our best start grants and best start foods payment, could be worth around £10,000 by the time an eligible child turns six, compared with the figure of around £1,800 that is available for eligible families in England and Wales.

It is therefore no surprise that poverty campaigners have called on the UK Government to introduce a similar benefit and match our ambitions on tackling child poverty. I echo that view, just as I agree with the calls that the UK Government should be doing much more to support people during the cost crisis, in which they face soaring inflation and spiralling energy bills. We have argued that the UK Government should be doing that but, unfortunately, it is not.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Will the cabinet secretary give way?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I will make slightly more progress, and then I will try to take another intervention.

We have already started delivery of our new winter heating payment to replace the cold weather payment provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, thereby providing a stable and reliable annual £50 that will help around 400,000 low-income families with heating expenses each winter. Our new benefit is expected to reach more than twice the number of people than did the DWP benefit that it replaced. It will be backed by £20 million every year and will provide vital support for energy costs. We also

continue to recognise the vital contribution of unpaid carers in our society through our carers allowance supplement.

Important actions are being taken elsewhere in the Scottish Government that also impact on our mission to tackle child poverty. Scotland already has the most generous funded childcare programme in the UK. All three and four-year-olds and around a quarter of two-year-olds are eligible for 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, which is backed by investment of around £1 billion per year. If families paid for those hours themselves, it would cost them around £5,000 per child per year. We are working with partners to progress our childcare offer even further, with plans to expand early learning and childcare to one and two-year-olds. We have also committed £15 million this year towards building a system of year-round school-age childcare that is fully funded for those who need it most.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** The cabinet secretary has my party's support on efforts to extend funded childcare, but does she share my concern about the lack of uptake, particularly among vulnerable two-year-olds? What does her Government plan to do to address that lack of uptake?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Alex Cole-Hamilton raises an important point. That is why we have worked with the DWP to ensure that, for the first time, we can use the information about who is eligible to contact people directly. That will be a very important stage for us and for local authorities in having the ability, for the first time, to be much more proactive about that. I am more than happy to work with the member on the issue, which I know that he and Willie Rennie have had discussions on in the past.

Moving on to travel, we continue to provide free bus travel for more than 2 million people, including all children and young people under 22, disabled people and everyone aged 60 or over. More than 50 million free bus journeys have been made by people under the age of 22 since our expansion of concessionary travel in January last year. That is another important saving for those with children.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member give way?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** How could I forget Stephen Kerr?

**Stephen Kerr:** I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for giving way. She makes a lot of very valuable points, but most of the things that she has talked about are mitigations of the effects of poverty. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Can we hear the member, please?

**Stephen Kerr:** I do not think that you can intervene on—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Kerr.

**Stephen Kerr:** As in, the things that the cabinet secretary has talked about deal with the symptoms of poverty, but we should focus on dealing with the root causes of poverty. [*Interruption.*] In respect of the root causes, how does curbing the number of apprenticeships, squeezing funding to Scottish training companies or making real-terms cuts to Scotland's colleges and universities in any way create more opportunity and deal with the root causes of poverty?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Well, well, Presiding Officer. Perhaps the gasps of disbelief from back-bench members were at a Tory member saying that we are dealing with mitigating the effects of poverty. Yes, we are, Mr Kerr. We are dealing with the UK Government's economic mismanagement and its contempt for a minimum wage at genuinely real living wage standards. We are dealing with a UK Government that is not interested in dealing with the causes of poverty, as amply demonstrated by its welfare policies. [*Interruption.*] If Stephen Kerr is not interested in my view on the issue, perhaps he could listen to stakeholders' views on it. We will continue to do everything that we can do within our limited powers; I only wish that his colleagues down south would do something remotely similar as well.

Housing is also vital in the fight against poverty and will be a focus for the Minister for Housing and me in this portfolio. An estimated 3,200 households with children have been helped into affordable housing in each year to March 2022. We will also, of course, continue working towards our target of providing 110,000 affordable homes by 2032.

Our next steps are very important in ensuring that our immediate priority is protecting people as much as possible. We have already tripled the fuel insecurity fund to £30 million. We know that food banks are not an appropriate or long-term solution to poverty. That is why we will soon publish a plan, grounded in human rights, that sets out further action that we will take towards ending the need for food banks. We recognise that employment can offer a route out of poverty for families. That is why we will continue to ensure that we invest in employability packages, too.

The Government is taking and will continue to take action that puts more money into the pockets of families and helps to turn the tide on poverty. We will do everything that we can within our powers and resources to substantially reduce child poverty. We have already delivered a range of measures that will help people right across Scotland. However, the key powers—including

those on energy, employment and, still, much of social security—remain reserved to the UK Government, which must match our ambition.

Only with the full powers of a normal, independent nation can we eradicate child poverty fully. However, I look forward to hearing members' contributions and their suggestions about how we can use the powers that we have now in our joint mission on child poverty.

I move,

That the Parliament commits to continuing the national mission on tackling child poverty; acknowledges that the most recent poverty statistics remain too high and that all levels of government must take action to reduce poverty and inequality in society; recognises the pressure being placed on household finances due to rising inflation, high energy bills and soaring increases to food costs, and that this cost of living crisis disproportionately impacts households on low incomes and is likely to exacerbate unacceptably high levels of child poverty; welcomes plans for an anti-poverty summit to guide future action on tackling poverty; acknowledges the significant action that the Scottish Government has already taken to tackle the cost of living and child poverty, including the tripling of the Fuel Insecurity Fund, expanding and increasing the value of the Scottish Child Payment and introducing new family benefits, mitigating the benefit cap as far as possible within devolved powers, the provision of 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, and offering universal free school meals to all pupils in P1 to P5, and calls on the UK Government to match the ambition shown by the Scottish Government and reverse the harmful welfare reform policies implemented since 2015, which would lift an estimated 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty in Scotland in 2023-24.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that there is no time in hand. Therefore, I urge them to stick to their speaking allocations, including if they take interventions. I encourage colleagues to keep their interventions as brief as possible.

15:47

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** I welcome Shirley-Anne Somerville to her new position in Government. I am sure that she will be delighted that she now has two Mileses in her life. In a few weeks, I will ask her who is the most annoying.

I also welcome Paul O'Kane to his role on the Labour front bench.

A number of organisations and charities provided useful briefings ahead of the debate, for which I thank them. I also thank them for the work that they undertake across our communities to support some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

This debate is an opportunity to reaffirm the cross-party consensus and objectives that were set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. The act was passed unanimously by Parliament and set an important target for us all for reducing

child poverty rates across our country. Eliminating child poverty must be a priority for all of us. I hope that, as the new cabinet secretary starts work in her new role in Government, she will genuinely reach out across Parliament to develop the next steps and listen to the new and fresh ideas that many of us are trying to ensure that the Scottish Government takes forward.

New pressures on the cost of living aggravated by the effects of the pandemic—such as rising food and fuel costs—and the war in Ukraine have had a negative impact on families across the country. We need a critical focus on the powers that we have to help to support those families.

I return to an issue that I have raised consistently in the Parliament: children who are homeless and living in unsuitable and temporary accommodation. The housing emergency in Scotland is contributing to levels of child poverty. None of us wants children and families to be stuck in unsuitable, unaffordable homes or temporary accommodation or believes that it is appropriate in this day and age.

Last March, we debated the issue and I pointed out that Scotland had more than 7,500 children living in temporary accommodation. For many families, a typical stay was more than 58 weeks. Such families are housed in hotels, former guesthouses and bed and breakfasts. Often, they have to share toilets and cooking facilities with strangers.

None of us approves of that or believes that it is appropriate to place young families and pregnant mothers in such accommodation. However, today, the situation is worse. There are more than 9,130 children living in temporary accommodation. That represents a 17 per cent rise in the space of one year alone.

We all want those children to have a permanent and safe home, which is vitally important to a child's wellbeing and development. The cabinet secretary will know a lot of detail about that from her time with the education portfolio. We need decisive action on that, which we have not seen, so I hope that, in her new role, the cabinet secretary will refocus her efforts on it and make it a personal top priority for the years ahead. We on the Conservative benches will work with ministers on any vital reforms that we can make, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will agree to urgent cross-party talks on the issue. I believe that we need to introduce legislation to ban councils placing children or pregnant women in temporary accommodation, as I have outlined. I hope that we can pursue that with the cabinet secretary in the future.

The Scottish Government's preventing homelessness duties present a good opportunity

for Scotland to further develop some of the best protections in the world for people who are at risk of homelessness, but we need those protections to be embedded and delivered through a preventative model, especially here in the capital, which will take significant work and resources to achieve.

In recent months, I have been working with campaigners and hospices across Scotland to highlight their call to action on the additional energy bills that are faced by the families of children with life-shortening conditions and people with terminal conditions in our society. Children with a life-shortening condition are 50 per cent more likely to be living in the most deprived parts of Scotland compared with the least deprived, yet the families of seriously ill children incur unavoidably high household energy costs.

Together for Short Lives, the UK-wide body that supports children with life-shortening conditions, has said that research shows that families with seriously ill and disabled children already pay almost double what an average UK household pays on their energy bills. That cannot continue. The reasons why that is the case are the running of life-saving equipment, the running of other energy-intensive equipment and the need to keep their home warm, often because they are providing a hospital-at-home service.

The Children's Hospice Association Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to do more to provide direct and targeted support to families, in particular for a scheme to be developed to enable families to recoup some of the running costs of life-saving energy-intensive equipment.

The former First Minister outlined where she wanted action to be taken forward. We have not seen any progress on that, but I would like the cabinet secretary to also commit to that being one of her top priorities in the weeks and months ahead. It is a critical issue and one for which both the Scottish and UK Governments can deliver better support packages. I am currently organising a cross-party round-table meeting on the issue with UK ministers, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will agree to attend and be part of that.

No one doubts that addressing the level of child poverty is a complex issue and one that requires the focus of both our Governments.

**The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie):** Miles Briggs has made some great points about the issues that families are facing, especially those with children who are living in poverty. Would he use the welcome summit that he has talked about to call for the abolition of the rape clause and the two-child cap?

**Miles Briggs:** I want to ensure that the event gives us an opportunity to look at all these issues. I hope that, in the interest of the two Governments working together, which I hope that, with the new First Minister, we can move forward on, it will present such an opportunity. The event is specifically about the energy crisis that many families are facing. I recently held a round-table event on hospices, and it was welcome that many Scottish National Party members attended. I know that they are acutely aware of the pressures that families are under.

In the time that I have left, I want to touch on black and minority ethnic children in Scotland, who child poverty figures show to be disproportionately affected. I want to ensure that the Scottish Government is live to that, because many organisations that have provided briefings have outlined the areas in which there has been very limited progress to date.

Earlier, we discussed a national minimum allowance for children in kinship care, which we need to see progress on. In 2016, the Scottish Government committed to implementing a national allowance for foster carers, as well as a national minimum allowance for children in kinship care, but that has not progressed, and it is currently sitting with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. It is another priority issue that I hope that the cabinet secretary will take forward soon.

I welcome the appointment of Natalie Don as Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise. There is an awful lot of work to do in that area, and I hope that a delivery programme will be developed as soon as possible to help to achieve all the outcomes, which we support, and to ensure that our young people have the best possible start now for their future.

It is critical that we hold the SNP-Green Government to account, and we will continue to do that from these benches. However, there are many areas in which we can work to make a difference, and I hope that the cabinet secretary genuinely wants to reset that relationship. We desperately need a Government that focuses the resources that we have in Parliament on delivering the outcomes that we all want to see, and I wish her well in doing that.

I move amendment S6M-08589.1, to leave out from the second “acknowledges” to end and insert:

“; recognises the fact that child poverty levels have remained the same since 2007, with 9,130 children living in temporary accommodation; expresses disappointment in the Scottish Government’s failure to close the attainment gap and to deliver free school meals for all primary school children; recognises that the Scottish Government has missed its deadline of devolving all social security benefits, and calls on the Scottish and UK governments to work together in order to ensure that no child goes to bed hungry.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Briggs. I gently remind members who have not pressed their request-to-speak buttons but wish to speak in the debate to press those buttons. Those who have made an intervention already might need to press their buttons again.

15:55

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I take this opportunity to welcome the cabinet secretary to her post. I wish her well in her new role and look forward to working constructively with her on our shared goal of making Scotland a better, fairer and more equitable society. I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor in this role, Pam Duncan-Glancy, who approached the role with tenacity and a forensic eye for detail. I know that she will be a formidable opponent in her new role as she holds the Government to account for its record on education. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary is breathing a sigh of relief because of that.

I move on to the substance of today’s debate on tackling the cost of living and reducing child poverty. There a lot of words in the prospectus that the First Minister unveiled a while ago, but there is little in the way of substance, new announcements or new methods of tackling poverty. Indeed, I detected little in the way of new committed money and spending. All I saw highlighted in the Government motion was the anti-poverty summit that the First Minister and the cabinet secretary have already spoken about this afternoon.

In principle, Scottish Labour of course supports the convening of that summit. I know that colleagues in the Labour Party will always work constructively when it comes to tackling the pernicious issue of poverty. However, if that summit becomes another talking shop on poverty, it will clearly fail to meet this important moment. An anti-poverty summit will not, in itself, provide tangible and meaningful support to help households that are experiencing deep poverty. It will not help them to buy more food or heat their homes in the winter, and nor will it help a parent to clothe their child.

The lack of ambition in the prospectus is symptomatic of a First Minister who appears to be distracted by fighting fires in his own party rather than addressing some of the most important issues that are facing the country. It is worrying that, after 16 years in power, an anti-poverty summit seems to be the limit of the Government’s plan and vision to address this deepening crisis.

I contrast that with other Governments and the progress that they made. After a decade of a UK Labour Government in 2007, the poorest 20 per

cent of families were almost £3,500 better off compared to how they were in 1997. When it was in power, Labour delivered. The most recent Labour Government lifted 2.4 million people out of poverty, including almost 1 million children, and child poverty fell faster here than it did in any other European country.

In this moment, Scotland is desperate for change. People do not want to see division and distraction. People are smart; we cannot just pull the wool over their eyes. They recognise when a party of Government is more focused on internal concerns than on delivering for the people.

People in Scotland are also at their wits' end with both of their Governments. They see the economic illiteracy of the Tories, which has inflicted immeasurable damage on our communities. They look at those dangerous and reckless economics and know that we need real change.

The need for change has never been starker. New research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that not only has the number of people who are living in deep poverty dramatically increased, the depth of the poverty that they are experiencing has become more severe. The cost of living crisis has exacerbated the situation, but poverty levels in Scotland are deep-rooted and they require deep solutions.

Extreme child poverty after housing costs has been rising since 2014. I read today in the excellent briefing from Includem that three in four people are now struggling to meet the costs of two or more essentials.

Scotland is desperate for solutions. It is desperate for competent and credible solutions that will address the major issues that are facing the country.

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** Does the member have any of those competent and comprehensive solutions to present to us today?

**Paul O'Kane:** Mr Macpherson has pre-empted me. I was just about to come to some concrete solutions. I take the opportunity to say to Ben Macpherson that I thought he performed well in his role as minister for social security and that it is a sad fact that there is no longer a dedicated ministerial post in Government to deal with social security issues as Mr Macpherson did previously.

It is clear that people want a laser focus on tackling poverty, fixing the economy and injecting a sense of hope, optimism and trust back into politics. In power, Labour could deliver once again. We would reduce people's household bills by investing in clean power systems and insulating more than 1.3 million homes. We would introduce

a proper windfall tax, helping to reduce household bills and tackling problem debt. We would provide households with a £100 rebate on their water bills and would deliver a green jobs revolution in Scotland, creating 50,000 jobs across the country and a wealth of new opportunities for young people. Those are the ideas that the Labour party will bring forward when we have the opportunity to put them to the people.

In various statements over the past few weeks, and during the leadership hustings, the First Minister has described independence as the golden thread that would run through the heart of his Government. That is the heart of the matter. It is no surprise that the Scottish National Party supports independence, but it is clear, now more than ever, that, no matter the size of the crisis that the country faces, the SNP will always place independence above all else and make it the answer for everything.

I know that the cabinet secretary will, as she did in her opening speech, blame Westminster and point to independence as the solution. It is true that the UK Tory Government has made the situation worse, but it is also true that the Scottish Government has failed to seize the mantle of making Scotland a better, more equal and more prosperous place to live. The Government must not sit on its hands but must use the powers of this place to address the concerning growth of deep poverty in Scotland. Continuity will not cut it. We need serious action to make the change that people want to see.

I move amendment S6M-08589.3, to leave out from "welcomes" to the end and insert:

"; notes plans for an anti-poverty summit to guide future action on tackling poverty; further notes that, after 16 years of an SNP administration, child poverty levels, after housing costs, have remained at 24%, and severe child poverty, after housing costs, has been rising since 2014; acknowledges that 94% of families surveyed by Includem for its report, It Is Not A Choice, have experienced worsening finances, and 73% are struggling to meet the cost of two or more basic essentials; expresses concern at the downgrading of social security in the Scottish Government's priorities, with the removal of a minister for social security; urges the Scottish Government to take decisive action to reduce poverty across Scotland in the face of these stark figures; highlights the implementation gap on the measures set out by Best Start, Bright Futures relating to employability support, and welcomes the Scottish Labour Party's plan to tackle the cost of living crisis by introducing a proper windfall tax that would help to pay to keep bills down, to pay for affordable public transport and housing support, to tackle problem debt, scrap school meal arrears, and provide help for households, including a £100 water bill rebate and top-ups to the welfare fund."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Alex Cole-Hamilton to speak to and move amendment S6M-08589.2.

16:01

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** As others have done, I begin by welcoming the cabinet secretary to her role. I worked well with her in the previous session of Parliament and look forward to doing so again.

I am glad to speak for the Liberal Democrats on this vitally important issue. It should be one that unites members and I am glad to hear so much consensus on many subjects.

As we have already heard, one in four children in Scotland live in poverty: a quarter of our nation's children face significant barriers to their education, are at risk of poor health and lack access to opportunities. That number has not changed in the 16 years that the SNP has been in government; the percentage remains stubbornly static.

I spent two decades working as a youth worker and witnessing at first hand the devastating impact of poverty on childhood. Poverty can also have serious impacts on and consequences for one's adult chances. It is an adverse childhood experience and is recognised as such. In the past year, the cost of living crisis has significantly exacerbated that challenge. One parent's experience, as reported to Save the Children, reads:

"My daughter heard me talking to her big sister about gas, electricity and food prices. She found a 5p coin in the street and told me to put it towards the bills."

Is that really what we have come to? When a child finds a penny on the street, they are supposed to wish for good luck, not worry about whether their family has enough to survive on. It is shameful that that is happening now, in Scotland.

The stark reality is that too many families can no longer afford either food or fuel and certainly cannot afford both. A study that was recently conducted by One Parent Families Scotland revealed that 61 per cent of participants were finding it extremely difficult to afford electricity or could no longer afford it, while half said the same about gas. We are in a crisis that warrants decisive action that the SNP has, time and again, failed to deliver.

Research that was undertaken by my party revealed that just over 5,000 homes were helped with insulation last year under the Government's insulation scheme. That sounds like a big number, but 874,000 households in Scotland currently face fuel poverty. Only 0.6 per cent of homes in Scotland have received the help that they so desperately need. That is why the Scottish Liberal Democrats are calling on the Scottish Government to tackle the issue urgently and to introduce an emergency insulation programme. I will speak more about that in my closing remarks.

Alongside the rising cost of fuel, parents are increasingly struggling to access childcare services, which jeopardises the sources of income that their family relies on just to get by. Increasing provision for childcare is an issue that my party has campaigned on for more than a decade, and I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for recognising that in our earlier exchange. I am glad to see that the Government has taken some of those calls on board.

As I said in my earlier intervention, however, and as I also say in my amendment, there is still much more that can be done. Scotland still has one of the highest levels of childcare costs and burdens of cost among members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and too many parents are unaware of their eligibility, particularly among the more vulnerable cohort of parents of two-year-olds. Parents of three and four-year-olds who are adrift of the labour market are presented with a take-it-or-leave-it offer on childcare. We know from the MacLean commission into the future of publicly funded childcare, which is more than a decade old now, that families outside the labour market may require far greater flexibility in their childcare offer in order to take up evening courses or they might need childcare on sporadic, one-off occasions to attend a job interview so as to re-enter the labour market. Those are challenges that we have solutions for that we have not yet deployed.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** Would the member agree with me and share my concern that, under the current measures, there has been a reduction in the number of placings and a reduction of about a quarter in the number of childminders? Are those not the sorts of things that we need to pay much closer attention to in delivering childcare?

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** I am very grateful to Daniel Johnson for bringing up that excellent point. Those who provide childminding are among the unsung heroes of the childcare sector, providing the wraparound flexibility that I have just referred to. I am sure that Daniel Johnson's inbox, like mine, is filled with messages from both parents and childminders who are throwing their hands up in alarm at the position that they have been left in.

While 25 per cent of children in Scotland live in poverty, that number rises to almost 40 per cent of children from ethnic minority or single-parent-household backgrounds. Moreover, women are particularly affected. A report that was published by Engender revealed that women account for 60 per cent of all jobs paid below the living wage. That, combined with the disproportionate pressure to carry out household labour, means that mothers are particularly at risk from spiralling mental ill health.

A testimonial from Includem highlights that grim reality:

“I am now on anti-depressants and sleeping tablets due to my worries for caring for my kids. I have lost a lot of weight as I chose to feed my kids over myself all too often.”

This is 21st-century Scotland; we cannot go on like this. No parent should be put in that position, but it is one that is becoming all too common. It is vital that the Scottish Government not only investigates mental health support for the pressures that parents in particular are facing—and children alike are exposed to them—but examines the intersectional impact of such pressures.

Our Government needs urgently to step up to the plate and show the world a Scotland that gives every child a fair start in life. The eyes of the country are on the chamber, and we are extending good will to the First Minister in that he has made this matter a priority, but the judgment of the people will be swift.

I move amendment S6M-08589.2, to insert at end:

“; further calls on the Scottish Government to rapidly bring forward a new emergency insulation programme that makes every home a warm one, alleviating fuel poverty, reducing energy bills, and overcoming the slow progress of existing schemes, and urges the Scottish Government to resolve the problems around the delivery of existing early learning and childcare (ELC) policies, in light of the thousands of two year olds from deprived backgrounds who are missing out on the benefits of funded hours, families finding that the 1,140 hours provision is inflexible or even inaccessible, and the need to immediately increase rates to protect the future of private and third sector providers, at the same time as also preparing for the further expansion of the funded ELC offer to younger children that is needed to boost attainment and benefit the economy.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** As we move to the open debate, I remind members that they will need to stick within their speaking-time limits.

16:08

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** A YouGov poll for StepChange Debt Charity has found that one in seven Scottish adults has £20 or less to live on after paying for essentials each and every month. That is a sobering thought as we debate child poverty. The low level of UK benefits, soaring inflation and food costs and crippling energy costs are among the clear and obvious factors that have led to that dreadful statistic. As we know, the cost of living crisis will hit children the most, with nearly one in four children in our nation living in poverty.

It matters that the policies of the UK Government—sometimes botched policies such as the Truss-Kwarteng budget, and sometimes deliberate acts of harm such as Brexit, the levels

of UK benefits and the sanctions regime—have fuelled that cost of living crisis and have impacted detrimentally on child poverty. More consensually, it also matters what we do in this place, in Scotland’s Parliament, to tackle child poverty.

That is why the Scottish Government has placed our Scottish child payment front and centre in getting cash directly into the pockets of the poorest families in our nation. Around 387,000 children are eligible for the payment this year. Modelling work from last year estimates that the £25 per week per child—a £100 payment per child in a low-income family, every four weeks—will lift 50,000 children out of poverty and will reduce relative poverty by 5 per cent. I shudder to think what poverty levels would look like in Scotland right now if it was not for the Scottish payment.

It is telling that the many briefings from the third sector organisations, which are very welcome in preparation for this afternoon’s debate, focus on calls for a further increase in the Scottish child payment. That is a clear acknowledgement of the power and effectiveness of the SNP’s Scottish child payment and of the real difference that it makes to many families in my constituency of Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn and right across Scotland. They call for an increase because it works.

Ahead of the launch of our new Scottish child payment, the call from the third sector was for a non-targeted £5 per week. The Scottish Government engaged with the third sector and, today, we have not a non-targeted universal benefit but a targeted benefit of £25 per week. When the Government works with the third sector, we get a good, positive outcome and real success.

I therefore warmly welcome the plans for an anti-poverty summit. It will not just be words; it will deliver action, because the evidence is there from what the Scottish Government has done previously. Just as our Scottish Government listened to those with lived experience of poverty and the third sector organisations that support them and delivered the transformational Scottish child payment in the first instance, we must do so once again, sharing ideas and suggestions about how we can improve lives that are blighted by poverty.

We have done lots of things other than the Scottish child payment, but I am not going to list those, because any summit or cross-party discussion must surely be about what we would do next. We do not have a bottomless pit of cash so, if we had cash, how would we spend it? Here are some ideas.

We know that there are calls for the Scottish child payment to go up to £40 per week. Is that affordable? If it is not affordable, should we look at

a summer supplement? We know that the summer months of July and August are cripplingly difficult for low-income families, so should we have a summer supplement for the Scottish child payment in July and August? We should discuss that idea at the summit and beyond.

I am a dad. I am fortunate that I can afford to clothe my children. However, I know the importance of the child clothing grant in giving me a school uniform to wear when I went to school.

I also know how often kids rip their trousers or grow out of their clothes, so it is welcome that the clothing grant has increased to at least £120 for children at primary school, and at least £150 for secondary school students. However, is once a year enough? Do we have to think about a second clothing grant? I am not saying where the money comes from for that but am suggesting ideas for spending money if it was available.

We cannot spend the same pound twice. Let us have a frank discussion about where the best investment would be to deliver the outcomes that we want in tackling child poverty.

What about free school meals? They are universal for P1 to P5 and are soon to be universal for P6 and P7. I say to the cabinet secretary that we have to deliver on that as soon as possible. If some local authorities are ready to go now but others are not, can those that are ready be allowed to go now? If they can find that cash now, why should they have to wait? In addition, what about secondary schools? What are we going to do there in the future? We should think in the medium to long term for those, too.

Finally, in the time that I have left, I mention the poverty-related attainment gap in education. We have to start looking at outcomes as well as educational qualifications. I am therefore delighted to see record positive destinations for kids from low-income backgrounds—in fact, for kids right across the country. I am delighted that we are ahead of schedule in getting the 20 per cent of children from the most deprived backgrounds represented in our higher education system. We are ahead of schedule in doing that for 2030. However, the role of colleges is crucial, and their funding is under pressure. I will leave it there, Presiding Officer. That is something else that we have to look at.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Stephen Kerr to speak for up to six minutes.

16:14

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** This debate should be a welcome opportunity for us to address the issues that contribute to child poverty. I am afraid, however, that we might easily slip into

a display of grievance, wallowing in pessimism and—as I tried to intervene earlier to say—talking more about symptoms than about root causes, which include intergenerational poverty, the breakdown of families, addiction, inequality of opportunity and worklessness and underemployment. People need help, and most importantly they need a good job that pays good wages.

**Bob Doris:** Will the member give way?

**Stephen Kerr:** I will if Bob Doris is very brief, because we just do not have time for debate.

**Bob Doris:** Does Stephen Kerr think that indebtedness is a huge pressure that leads to the breakdown of families? The UK welfare regime may perhaps contribute to indebtedness occurring in the first place.

**Stephen Kerr:** I agree that indebtedness is a contributing factor to some of the situations that families find themselves in.

The Scottish Government's recent report, "Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2019-22" states, rightly, that

"Having paid work is an effective way out of poverty, and those families where all adults are in full-time work have a low poverty risk."

However, I qualify what the report says by adding that skilled paid work is better than unskilled work, and of course higher pay is better than low pay. We need, therefore, to have an honest debate about the impact—

**Daniel Johnson:** Will the member give way?

**Stephen Kerr:** I will not be able to take any more interventions—I apologise. Everyone knows that I love a debate, but I want to say what I have prepared.

We need an honest debate about the impact of the pandemic on the global economy, the Scottish economy and Scottish society, and the devastating complication of the illegal Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. To be frank, we are kidding ourselves if we do not acknowledge that the extended coronavirus restrictions that we applied in this country, with a degree of rigour and a longevity that other countries did not apply, have had a deeply negative impact on our economy and our society.

That is despite the UK Government committing to vast borrowing to support individuals and families through the furlough scheme, and to support businesses and other organisations through various other measures. None of that was cheap—in fact, we borrowed more than £500 billion. I do not believe that members of this Parliament are economically illiterate enough not to understand that when one borrows such vast

amounts of money, there will be a negative impact on the public finances.

I seem to recall that it was members of the SNP and the Labour Party who called the loudest for those interventions. How did they think that it would all be paid for? When the economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was felt in spiralling energy costs, was it not members of the SNP and the Labour Party who called the loudest for interventions in the retail energy market to support individuals and families, and businesses, in order to mitigate the impact of extraordinary exponential cost increases? Was it not a Conservative Government that took unprecedented measures to intervene to support families and businesses?

That was also paid for by unprecedented borrowing. How did members think that was going to be paid for? As I said, I hope that none of us is guilty of economic illiteracy. We know what the economic facts of life are; perhaps we, as a country, have had to learn them all over again. We cannot keep borrowing and borrowing and still command the confidence of international markets. There comes a point at which we must demonstrate the ability to service and repay our borrowing. Who knew? We all did.

A further example of the social impact of the pandemic that is now being made manifest is the steep rise in the incidence of violence and disruption in classrooms. Lockdown was irredeemably bad for our children and young people. They were the least likely to succumb to Covid-19, but they were, arguably, hit the most by the restrictions of lockdown. There are now aeons of research papers that show how negatively impacted children and young people were by lockdowns.

What are the root causes of intergenerational poverty? They are a lack of equal opportunity; persistent worklessness in households; underemployment; and a deep pessimism that things are, and will always be, as they are and can never be changed.

I am afraid that the biggest purveyors of that pessimism in this Parliament are members of the Scottish National Party. It is a party for pessimists, with much to be pessimistic about—mired in scandal and reeking of corruption. We have a skills shortage and record vacancies, and we have record levels of net migration, but Scotland does not benefit. Members—including the minister who interrupted me—might like to ask themselves why that is the case. We have people who are unemployed and underemployed and yet we are turning our back on the very things that help root out and tackle the root causes of child poverty.

We should be creating more apprenticeships, not rationing them. We should be funding technical education, but we are not. We should be investing in our colleges, but we are cutting that investment.

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

**Stephen Kerr:** Members of the SNP and the Labour Party offer only welfarism. It is not the solution; it is a mitigation.

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

**Stephen Kerr:** The Conservatives offer a way out of poverty, by tackling its root causes.

16:21

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** The most recent poverty statistics are not acceptable. We are a wealthy nation with all the resources required to ensure an equal and fair childhood for all. One child having their health, development and wellbeing impacted by poverty is one too many, but the fact that one in four children in Scotland find themselves in a situation where their future life chances are being impacted is at the forefront of my mind as I make my remarks and support calls for bold action. The Conservative member who just spoke might think that it is pessimism, but I feel that it is more empathy.

Bold action is needed from all spheres of government to eradicate poverty and inequality in our society. Pressure is being placed on all household finances due to rising inflation, high energy bills and soaring increases to food costs. Families who were previously managing are finding themselves increasingly struggling. We also know that the cost of living crisis disproportionately impacts households on low incomes and is likely to exacerbate those unacceptably high levels of child poverty if we do not come together and take further bold action.

I acknowledge the significant actions that the Scottish Government has already taken to tackle the cost of living crisis and child poverty. Bob Doris was correct to get us to imagine what things would be like if there was no child payment, for example. Those actions include the First Minister's pledge to triple the fuel insecurity fund to support anyone at risk of self-disconnection or self-rationing of their energy use as well as expanding and increasing the value of the Scottish child payment and introducing new family benefits.

The five family payments, including the Scottish child payment, could be worth around £10,000 by the time an eligible child turns six, compared to around £1,800 for eligible families in England and Wales, and more than £20,000 by the time an

eligible child is 16. Of course, there is also the provision of funded early learning and childcare and the offer of free, good-quality meals to all pupils in primary 1 to P5. Those things make a real difference and have been welcomed by anti-poverty campaigners.

Speaking about the Scottish Government's budget, Satwat Rehman of One Parent Families Scotland said:

"We are heartened to see that the Scottish Government has listened to several important calls from anti-poverty organisations, such as increasing taxes for the wealthiest to raise funds for public services ... We are also pleased that the government is raising benefits in line with inflation, which is the right thing to do and will make a real difference for low-income families who are being snowed under by rising costs".

Peter Kelly from the Poverty Alliance stated:

"The principles that are embedded into the social security system in Scotland ... I think is particularly important. The principle around making a contribution to reducing poverty in particular I think is an important principle".

Undoubtedly, the progress that the Scottish Government has made is being hindered by the devastating impact of the UK Government's decade of austerity and welfare cuts. The UK Government has full economic and fiscal powers that it could use to make a real difference to the lives of so many. For example, it could make use of borrowing, provide more benefits and support households, introduce taxation of windfall profits and regulate the energy market.

The latest UK budget was a huge missed opportunity to help people. The reality is that the UK Government could have done far more to ease the burden on so many of our citizens, but it has chosen not to act.

The starkest example of the bind that we find ourselves in with the current constitutional set-up is that although the Scottish Government is increasing and expanding the Scottish child payment, the UK Government decided to cut universal credit. The UK Tory Government has also brought us the frankly illogical two-child limit and its accompanying repugnant rape clause, the benefit cap, the five-week wait, sanctions and over a decade of austerity.

The Scottish Government will spend up to £84 million in 2023-24 on discretionary housing payments to mitigate the bedroom tax, benefit cap and on-going freeze of the local housing allowance. That is estimated to help more than 4,000 families and around 14,000 children to meet their housing costs. Even those who do not believe in Scottish independence surely must occasionally wonder what we could do if we did not have to invest so much in protecting Scottish people from cruel UK Government policies.

**Miles Briggs:** A recent Audit Scotland report states:

"The Scottish Government has not ... demonstrated a clear shift"

towards

"preventing child poverty."

What is the member's assessment of that report?

**Ruth Maguire:** It is astounding to be asked that question when I have just let members know how much money is being spent on mitigating Tory policies. I am astounded. I do not understand that.

Here is something that may be of interest. Reversing those welfare reforms would put £780 million into the pockets of Scottish households and lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty in 2023-24.

I mentioned that all spheres of government need to act in the face of this cost crisis, but I also want to add my voice to those of anti-poverty campaigners who are calling on the Scottish Government to go even further with the game-changing child payment and are asking for an increase to £40 a week as soon as possible. Research from Save the Children, the Trussell Trust and the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that that action could lift 30,000 children out of poverty, so it would help the Parliament meet our 2030 child poverty targets.

While we are working to do that, let us not forget that those targets are about improving the life chances of individual children across Scotland: children who deserve an equal and fair childhood.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Claire Baker, who joins us online.

16:27

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** The motion for today's debate may recognise the persistently high level of poverty in Scotland, but we should recognise that poverty is not inevitable. The failure to address levels of poverty and child poverty in our communities is the result of political choices. That the level of child poverty level remains at 24 per cent, after 16 years of SNP Government, is a reflection of its choices.

We all believe that Scotland is a place that values compassion and justice, and we share a belief that everyone should have what they need in order to live a healthy and fulfilled life. We believe that Scotland is a place where everyone should have a decent standard of living and the same chances in life, no matter who they are or where they come from. Yet Scotland is also a place where families and individuals are reliant on food banks and struggling to pay their bills. One

million Scots live in poverty, and the constant pressure of it can dominate their lives.

No one chooses to have their child go to bed hungry or to huddle under covers for warmth instead of turning on the heating, but that is the reality for many. If we want Scotland to be a country that services the wellbeing of its people, we must ensure that everyone has the means to live in dignity.

Both of our Governments have failed those who are most in need. The UK Government's welfare reform policies have been incredibly harmful, but the Scottish Government has not—[*Inaudible.*]—of those who are struggling to get by. Ambition has not reduced child poverty rates nor stemmed the increase in persistent deprivation.

Every year, 250,000 children experience poverty. That is one in four children in Scotland, which, as the Action for Children briefing states, is “not just a national scandal, but a national shame”.

Members have received a large number of briefings ahead of this debate that not only highlight the scale of the problem and the number of organisations working to support those impacted, but set out clearly the type of actions and interventions that are needed to change the situation.

The current cost of living crisis means that ever-increasing numbers of people are now unable to afford the essentials of food, heat and clothing—the basics that we all need to live. Food banks throughout the country are providing record numbers of parcels to people who cannot afford to buy food. Food banks, which should be a temporary measure and an emergency service, are struggling to keep up with demand. We can end the need for them only by increasing people's incomes and embedding a cash-first approach by getting more money into pockets so that people can buy food.

On Friday, I was at a meeting in Fife in which I listened to Ian Campbell, who is the chair of Kirkcaldy Foodbank. The demand in Fife, as in the rest of Scotland, is huge. Last month was the busiest month ever for Kirkcaldy Foodbank, with 1,612 visits and around 34,000 meals distributed. Some 576 food parcels were given out to families, 423 were given to couples, and 611 were given to individuals. In 2023, 34 per cent of the people who receive food from Kirkcaldy Foodbank are children. The food bank runs across five distribution points in the town. In July last year, it had to take the decision, which it really regrets, to limit people to one food parcel a week due to an increase in demand.

I heard Stephen Kerr's comments earlier about the importance of employment. However, we know

that, in a low-wage insecure employment market, when prices are rising, being in employment does not stop many people needing to use food banks. One in five of those who are referred by the Trussell Trust lives in a household in which someone is working. As wages fail to keep pace with inflation, already stretched pay packets cover less and less. Vulnerable families have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, as structural inequalities are intensified and more and more families are pushed below the poverty line.

For single-parent households, the cost of living crisis has hit hard. Two in five children in poverty in Scotland are in single-parent households, and 38 per cent of children living in single-parent households are in poverty. Last year, three in five single parents found it extremely difficult to afford or could not afford electricity. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that as many as seven in 10 single parents were skipping meals and going hungry to reduce costs.

It is right that single parents are recognised as a priority group in the tackling child poverty delivery plan. We need to see targeted interventions to support them, recognising that they are among those who are at the greatest risk of poverty, and that address the structural barriers that they face as sole earners and carers.

With fewer than 60 per cent of lone parents in Scotland in paid work, the employment gap between single parents and other households demonstrates the link between caring responsibilities and lower employment. There is consistent experience of a lack of affordable and flexible childcare for those in work, and the expansion of wraparound childcare for early years and school-age children is vital to improving employment prospects for single-parent families. We need to see greater action on that. We also need to see an increase in job opportunities that allow single parents to meet their caring responsibilities and measures that address the gender inequality in employment.

Measures such as expanding the Scottish child payment and introducing new family benefits have provided support for low-income families, but it is clear that much more needs to be done to build on those measures, with more resources and more urgency for those who are at greatest risk. Much more can be done on childcare, school costs and employment, and that must be done at pace, not just promised tomorrow. It takes more than ambition to create a Scotland in which everyone can live in dignity, and not in need.

16:33

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** There is no denying that the impact that poverty has on families is being felt more than ever. The term “working poor” does not sit particularly well with me, but it has become more prominent. We are seeing in-work poverty, with individuals and families who are in work being left unable to make their pay packets stretch to meet all their needs. Those who were only just able to cope and make ends meet are now struggling completely with the cost of living crisis. Those who were already struggling are completely devastated. With increases in food prices, energy, utilities and other essential costs, which have mainly been brought on by the heartless UK Government, economic insecurity is being felt by everyone. However, the burden has, of course, fallen disproportionately on the already vulnerable—on lone parents, those with disabilities, carers, older people and, perhaps most of all, children.

It is shocking that 69 per cent of children in relative poverty live in working households—that has been emphasised already. As many will know, my Coatbridge and Chryston constituency is no stranger to the impact of child poverty. As I have said in Parliament before, I do not think that that is at all fair on children and families in postindustrial communities such as mine that have experienced the multigenerational poverty that the cabinet secretary referred to.

Let us make no bones about it—communities in Lanarkshire and elsewhere were very much still recovering from the Tory-inflicted deindustrialisation of the 1980s when the current cost of living crisis was inflicted on us. The Tories laugh, but many of us lived through that—Tory Governments put us down and then, just as we were making our way up again, they came in to deal yet another blow. Conservative Governments are no friend of communities such as Coatbridge and Chryston, which is perhaps why few people in my constituency would even consider voting Conservative.

Thankfully, unlike in the 1980s, we now have a devolved Government of our own and we have been able to mitigate some of the damage. It was heartening to hear Stephen Kerr acknowledge the measures that the Scottish Government has taken to mitigate the impact of his party’s policies. The Scottish Government has used and continues to use our limited powers and budget to break the cycle of poverty but, without Scottish independence to uncouple us from this destructive Westminster Government, we remain limited.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member give way?

**Fulton MacGregor:** I was not going to take an intervention from a Conservative on this issue but, as I mentioned Stephen Kerr, I will take an intervention from him.

**Stephen Kerr:** I point out that I was addressing mitigations in the context of social security; I did not refer to the mitigations that Fulton MacGregor referred to. I was talking about the need for us to focus on root causes of poverty, on which, I hope, we are all united.

**Fulton MacGregor:** The new First Minister, in one of his first acts, is ensuring that the Scottish Government triples the fuel insecurity fund to £30 million to support anyone who is at risk of self-disconnection or self-rationing their energy use. Thousands more low-income families will also benefit from free school-age childcare as part of a £15 million investment to help to tackle child poverty.

As my colleagues have said, one of the things that we can be most proud of as a Parliament is the Scottish child payment, which has made a huge impact on families in my constituency and across the country. As has been said, the payment has been expanded to eligible six to 15-year-olds and has been increased in value to £25 per child per week. About 387,000 children are now forecast to be eligible in 2023-24, and it is estimated on the basis of modelling that it will lift 50,000 children out of poverty and reduce relative child poverty by five percentage points. I agree with the call from the charities that Ruth Maguire and Bob Doris mentioned that it would be a good move to increase the payment further, because it works and would provide further help.

Given the large number of children in my constituency who live in poverty, it is perhaps no surprise that there are excellent and innovative examples of groups and charities that work tirelessly to make sure that no children go without. As I have done before, I will take a bit of time to pay tribute to some of those organisations.

Cool School Uniforms is a uniform bank that Julie O’Byrne and Anne Cully set up a few years ago in Coatbridge. The charity has grown exponentially and it works tirelessly to ensure that no child goes to school without warm, clean and suitable clothing. I have a strong interest in the subject, which I have asked many questions about and held round-table discussions on, so I will be interested to hear how the new Government plans to expand our school uniform policy from the current one-off payment of £120, which Bob Doris highlighted.

St Augustine’s Outreach, which ran under the name of the stay connected project during the pandemic, is also doing wonderful work. It helps with all aspects of life by providing furniture, a

clothing bank and a pantry; it ran a successful toy appeal at Christmas; it offers financial support for energy through Payzone; it has made up toiletry bags to tackle hygiene poverty; and it most recently had a warm space in the evenings that provided free soup and hot drinks. Over the cold months, many organisations in my area opened up warm rooms, which let people who could not afford to put on their heating come in for a wee drink and a chat in a welcoming environment.

I always mention Coatbridge Community Foodbank, which is an absolutely fantastic organisation, as is Moodiesburn Community Foodbank. I agree with Claire Baker that food banks are seeing demand soar. The fact that we require such places is absolutely atrocious, and I make no apology for saying, as I have said before, that that is all down to the UK Tory Government's heartless incompetence. However, I am glad that we have such kind and caring people in our communities who come together to mitigate the situation and offer assistance in such difficult times. I am happy to end there.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** I call Maggie Chapman, who joins us remotely.

16:39

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** I welcome Shirley-Anne Somerville to her new Cabinet post, and I look forward to working closely with her over the coming months. I thank the Deputy First Minister for the open and collaborative working relationship that we developed on social security and other issues when she was in her previous role.

I am sorry not to be joining members in person today, but I have been at the Scottish Trades Union Congress annual gathering in Dundee, where many of the discussions and debates that are under way have relevance to the debate in Parliament. Protecting and enhancing our public services, supporting our workers and their families by delivering well-paid jobs with fair and safe conditions, and tackling inequality and discrimination across society are fundamental to eliminating poverty and inequality.

I thank all the organisations that have sent in briefings and information in advance of today's debate. We have probably had more emails about this debate than many of our previous discussions on poverty, and I know that many of us appreciate all the information that is sent to us. However, the level of contact is perhaps a troubling sign—not because the organisations concerned are engaging with us frequently, but because they have to, with messages that are pretty bleak.

The fact that one in four children in Scotland lives in poverty should—does—shame us all. The devastating impacts on our young people's physical and mental health, development and wellbeing, and on their hopes and dreams, are wide ranging and often lifelong. Poverty robs our young people of their right to a fair childhood; it robs them of a fair future, too.

Let us remember that poverty is a political choice. It is a consequence of decisions taken—sometimes decades ago; sometimes far away—across all different levels and departments of government.

We do not have poverty because we, overall, lack resources or money. Just last year, the five largest energy companies racked up nearly \$200 billion-worth of profit. That is profit, not turnover. It is clear that lots of money is available; it is just not in the right places. We have seen successive UK Conservative and Labour Governments act in ways that have failed to provide the foundations for a strong, equal and just society.

When the current cost crisis—the worst that we have seen in a generation—hit, many families were already struggling. Before the cost crisis—indeed, before the pandemic—too many were already in poverty and many were just about getting by. Their experiences of poverty were exacerbated by the cost crisis, not caused by it. A decade of Tory austerity meant that, when the pandemic and then the cost crisis hit, there was very little, if any, spare capacity to cope.

I wish that we had not had more than a decade of austerity and of penny pinching and belt tightening for public services while the already wealthy profited from the increasing misery and precarity of the rest of us. The profiteering seen in recent years, during Covid, by the energy companies and those who benefit from the destruction of our social fabric and environmental life-support systems should never have been allowed to happen, never mind enabled and supported by decision makers. Stephen Kerr might do well to remember that.

Here in Scotland, we have tried to mitigate some of the worst effects of that greedy broken system by increasing the Scottish child payment, by providing the fuel insecurity fund and through targeted childcare support and other commitments. I am pleased to have played a role in securing the mitigation of the benefits cap. It is clear, however, that there is so much more that we need to do. We must ensure that we support families now, while building resilience into all our systems and processes to guard against future crises.

Although we do not have the powers to do everything that we might wish to, particularly for

the longer-term structural reform that our economy so desperately needs, we must do more than we are currently doing. Decent support for mental health services for all young people is vital. It has a return to society of up to eight times the initial investment and clear long-term positive impacts for individuals and their wider communities.

We must mitigate the penalties that families with more than two children face because of the Tories' immoral rape clause. Over the coming months, we will be exploring how we can better harness our collective wealth and income to better support and protect our children and to boost our economy. We want to be in a position to provide universal free school meals, as we know that that supports every aspect of a child's growth and development.

Affordable, warm homes are the bedrock of healthy, happy families. We must act to tackle the far-too-high levels of use of temporary accommodation.

We need decisive action on public sector debt recovery, and we need to deliver on the promises of employability support. Helping parents, especially mothers, into work is fundamental to meeting our child poverty targets.

We must do all that while clearly recognising the gendered nature of poverty and the multifaceted intersectionality that must be embedded in all our actions to tackle it, so that we do not reinforce structural inequalities. Those parents and children who are the easiest to ignore are the ones we must work hardest to support.

We must recommit to meeting the interim and 2030 child poverty targets. That means doing more than we are doing currently. It requires a ramping-up of our cash-first approach. It means seriously considering proposals that might have felt too radical or too difficult before, including those on tax reform and wealth redistribution. That will not be easy, but it is vital. Our children and our children's children deserve nothing less.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call James Dornan, who joins us remotely.

16:45

**James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** According to the Institute for Government, the cost of living crisis refers to the fall in real disposable incomes due to rising inflation and taxes. It goes on to say that the UK has been in crisis since late 2021, although it seems to many people that we have lurched from one crisis to another for a lot longer than that and that they have been under severe financial pressure since well before late 2021.

Despite those facts, the inaction of the uncaring and out-of-touch Tory Government has been, even

by the Tories' miserable standards, truly woeful. It is difficult to understand what reality they inhabit when, only the other day, after the International Monetary Fund reiterated its forecast that the UK economy will shrink this year, which will cause further hardship for hundreds of thousands of already hard-pressed families and businesses, that was welcomed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer as evidence that things are working. They clearly are not, and the UK Government has nothing to offer us. It has no ideas and no plans—nothing.

In contrast, the UK Government is happy to continue to provide tax breaks to the top 1 per cent while raising taxes for the poorest in our society. Let us be clear: the UK Government is not the solution to the cost of living crisis; it caused it. It failed to grow the economy while in power, added 10 years of austerity and got us trapped in a cycle of low wages coupled with higher taxes to pay for overstretched public services that have been weakened by a decade of cuts, which has left us all worse off. Many people are struggling from one day to the next, and more and more families, including children, are being pushed into poverty. It truly is scandalous.

Barnardo's recent report, "At what cost?", highlights the fact that

"Children in the most vulnerable and precarious circumstances will be among those most exposed to the cost-of-living crisis".

The report states:

"Families with nothing left to cut back on are no longer having to choose between heating or eating—instead they're unable to afford either."

It also found that more than half of parents have been forced to cut back on food spending for their family over the past 12 months. One in five parents said that they struggled to provide sufficient food due to the current cost of living crisis, and more than a quarter of parents said that their child's mental health had worsened due to the situation. Parents admitted to resorting to desperate measures, with a quarter having sold possessions and one in five having taken on new credit cards, extra debt or a payday loan. It is estimated that, throughout the UK, more than one in four children now live in poverty, and the situation is getting worse by the day.

I will respond to Claire Baker's points. Child poverty levels in Scotland might well be stuck at 24 per cent for the time being, but the levels are worse everywhere else. They have got worse during the period in which our mitigations have helped to at least keep the levels steady. That is nowhere near good enough—not at all—but at least we have not allowed the situation to get worse with the minimal powers that we have.

Rather than defending the UK Government's abysmal record, Opposition parties should acknowledge some fundamental truths. The Scottish Parliament does not have many of the powers that are pivotal to tackling low wages, low growth, high inflation and high overall taxation. Those powers are controlled and closely guarded by the UK Government, but we need them. We could use those powers to build on the measures that the Scottish Government has taken to tackle the crisis with the limited powers at our disposal.

Perhaps someone should explain to Paul O'Kane the difference between the powers that Labour had in 1997 and the situation that I have just described. Despite his view, that shows the benefit of being an independent nation.

Our latest programme for government, which was brought in under our previous First Minister and will be carried forward by our existing First Minister, sets out a number of measures. Those include the Scottish child payment, the new winter heating payment, the doubling of the fuel insecurity fund and the widening of eligibility for the tenant grant fund—there are lots of measures there.

If people do not believe that the Scottish Government is truly making a difference, they should listen to Paul Lewis from the BBC's "Money Box" programme, when he says that things are better in Scotland due to Holyrood's use of devolved powers over tax and benefits. In a column for the *Radio Times*, he said:

"I once coined the acronym Tabis—Things Are Better in Scotland—as a shorthand for the forward-looking social policies of that country. And it gets truer all the time. Over the past 25 years devolution has given Scotland limited but growing independence over its social security and tax policies. And they are better."

He once coined the term TABIS—things are better in Scotland. Wow! Of course, people would never believe that when they read our newspapers or listen to opponents telling us day after day how things are better anywhere else and everywhere but Scotland. Who to believe?

Given the UK Government's inaction and the predictions that the crisis is set to continue, if not get worse, there is a real need for us all to do more. That is why I welcome the initiative that is set out in today's motion, and particularly the plans to hold an anti-poverty summit to guide future action on tackling poverty. I would welcome it if the cabinet secretary, in responding to the debate, took the opportunity to provide us with more details of the proposed summit, including the timescale for delivery and whether local organisations will be able to participate in person or in writing. No one knows better the issues affecting a local community than those who belong to and work in it.

It is clear that there is still so much more for us all to do. Far too many people, particularly children, still live in poverty. I have lived through the stress, the anger, the heartbreak and the break-ups that poverty brings to families, particularly those with young children. Nothing is more debilitating to people's self-esteem than the struggle to find the money to buy uniforms or new shoes or, as previously stated, having to decide whether to eat or heat. I therefore urge my colleagues from across the chamber to pledge to support any move to gain the full levels of power that are required to tackle all the areas that impact on child poverty. Only then can we truly say that we have done all that we can for those who need us the most.

16:52

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I appreciate the Government holding this debate on the cost of living and reducing child poverty so early in the new First Minister's era, because we all agree that child poverty is unacceptable and deserves our full attention, in order that we ensure that it is eradicated.

However, I do not see how the Scottish Government can categorise the subject as a "national mission", given its recent actions. I find it incredibly disappointing that the First Minister decided to remove the ministerial appointment that had sole responsibility for social security. It is welcome to see Ben Macpherson in the chamber this afternoon. I have worked closely with him and, although we disagreed, I often found him to be open and willing to engage on the subject. I think that he will be missed by the Scottish Government.

As Stephen Kerr pointed out, social security is by no means the only tool with which to alleviate poverty, but it is a vital tool in our efforts to provide support to the most vulnerable people in our society.

The cabinet secretary knows the social security brief well, but she is going to absorb that brief as part of her wider portfolio. Social Security Scotland is still in the process of being set up and is experiencing many teething problems. The Scottish Government has still not fully devolved all the social security benefits that it took on, and completion of case transfer is not expected until 2025, at the earliest. Even with the cabinet secretary's abilities, I am sceptical about whether she will be able to devote the required time and energy to social security while her brief remains so busy. If the Government is serious about tackling poverty—in particular, child poverty—it must respect the vital role of social security by bringing back a minister.

The truth is that the Government has been in power for more than 15 years and has made no meaningful improvement in relation to child poverty in Scotland. We heard just a couple of weeks ago that the level of child poverty in Scotland remains at the same level that it was at when the SNP took over in 2007, with one in four children living in relative poverty and one in five living in absolute poverty, after housing costs.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Will Jeremy Balfour comment on the impact of UK Government welfare policies on pushing children into poverty, and on how many people the decrease of £20 in universal credit pushed into poverty?

**Jeremy Balfour:** The cabinet secretary again picks one area rather than looking at the whole of what the UK Government did during Covid. I had to remind her predecessor of this: we are the Scottish Parliament, and I am here to hold the Scottish Government to account. That is my role. The Scottish Government has to take responsibility for the decisions that it makes, but it never does.

No matter how hard I try, I cannot get my head around those child poverty numbers. This is not the 21st-century Scotland that we should be living in. The SNP-Green Government is failing the children of Scotland. As in many other areas, the promises and rhetoric that it sold to the Scottish people are a million miles away from the reality of its failed delivery.

Former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon promised to close the poverty-related attainment gap completely—not “partially”, not “almost”, but “completely”. The reality is that the SNP has failed to do so and has walked back on that promise. The gap actually widened last year; it did not narrow. Not only is the SNP not following through on its promise, but it has presided over a decline in standards for the poorest people in Scotland. The SNP promised to provide free school meals for all primary school children by August 2022, but the reality is that it has moved that back to 2024. Once again, we hear big talk with no results.

Finally, I will circle back to Social Security Scotland and the mess that the Scottish Government has made of what could and should have been a very promising initiative.

The devolution of social security was a golden opportunity to create a unique Scottish system that would be underpinned by the broad shoulders of the UK Government. Instead, what the SNP has produced is over time, over budget, overstretched and still not fully delivered. As I said, I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are trying to access the Scottish child payment but are unable to do so to get the help that they desperately need, because Social Security

Scotland phone lines are permanently engaged and its web chats crash because they are too busy. The story is the same for the best start grant. It is all very well having those benefits, but if the people who most need them cannot access them, what is their point?

Once again, I bring up the fact that there is no longer a specific social security minister who can deal with these issues. The SNP cannot tell us seriously that it is focused on child poverty and the cost of living while doing away with that vital role and diverting resources to the work of its divisive nationalist agenda. We all agree that eradicating child poverty is a far more important national mission than the SNP’s divisive and unwelcome independence mission.

16:58

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** In speaking to the Labour amendment, I will address the cost of living crisis, in the main. Across the UK, wages have been stuck for the best part of two decades, and the Trades Union Congress has said that UK workers are on course for two decades of lost pay. They have suffered the longest pay squeeze in all our lifetimes, so it should be no surprise that so many workers have been on strike in so many sectors in order to fight for fair pay and working conditions in the middle of a crisis, and in order to recoup their huge loss of pay over those years.

As the STUC has its annual congress this week in Dundee, Scottish Labour is clear that we stand in solidarity with all the trade unions and professional organisations, and with the nurses and doctors—in fact, all workers—who are vital to running our public services.

However, as the leader of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—RMT—Mick Lynch, has said repeatedly during the strikes, the individual strikes are critical to encourage growth in sectors outwith the public sector. In other words, trade unions are also standing up for people who are not in trade unions. There is generally greater wage growth in the private sector than there is in the public sector, but it is a basic requirement in today’s society.

There is a need to create a floor—basic wage rates and fairness—for young workers in particular, but also for all those who work in precarious employment. That is why we need to legislate against zero-hours contracts. That is long overdue and is needed for many sectors. It is the basis of a fair and modern society.

Under long-lasting austerity, the average British family is more than £8,000 poorer than its equivalents in other advanced economies. There are many reasons for that, but the complicated

post-Brexit trade barriers continue to add to the woes. That should never be forgotten.

The crisis is intensifying. It is impacting on more and more people and the damage that it is causing is there for all to see. Many people are in despair because there is no end in sight.

The cost of living crisis does not affect only people who are on the breadline. Britain's mortgage market contracted for the fifth month in a row last month, as the jump in interest rates that followed Liz Truss's September mini-budget continues to damage the economy and trigger a collapse for new home loans. When we talk to many people about that, we find that the increase in mortgage interest payments alone, never mind the mortgages, is astronomical.

We can see that the cost of living crisis is extremely scary for a wide range of people, but large corporations have fuelled inflation with price increases that have gone beyond the rising costs of raw materials and wages and are pushing shopping bills to record highs, according to an analysis of hundreds of company accounts. The cost of living crisis is very much a cost of greed crisis, because virtually all the big companies that sell essential food items and fuel are making vast record-breaking profits.

If we talk to most ordinary people about the rising cost of food, we find that it is not even transparent. We accept that costs are rising for particular reasons, but there is shock about the extent of rises, with food inflation reaching well into double figures.

I am speaking more to the cost of living aspect of the motion than to the poverty aspect, but it highlights the situation that we face as a country where living standards are declining, home ownership is getting harder to achieve, individual and household finances are getting more precarious for many more people, people who are just above the poverty line are increasingly likely to fall below it and many people have a lower standard of living than their parents did. We see a pattern of stagnation and decline.

In her opening speech, the cabinet secretary mentioned the importance of understanding intergenerational inequality. We should talk more about that issue. We did that in the previous session of Parliament, but the situation is even more acute now. Young people under the age of 40 will never see the levels of home ownership and prosperity that their mothers and fathers saw. That is an important policy agenda that the Government must address.

Rampant profiteering drives inflation and cranks up the cost of living for workers and families. It has been going on for almost two decades now. Children are the clear victims of those exploitative

policies. The latest statistics from the "Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2019-22" publication make for difficult and discouraging reading for Scotland's families: the rate of child poverty in Scotland remains at the same stubborn 24 per cent level—that is 250,000 children who are experiencing poverty each year—as it was 16 years ago. That suggests to me that the Scottish Government needs to have, and will have, fresh policies in this Administration. It really needs to examine why that level is not coming down.

The sad fact is that we are in the third decade of the 21st century and Scotland still has levels of poverty that should be consigned to the past. That is not just a national scandal but a national shame.

The cruel irony is that child poverty is expensive. As we have discussed many times in the chamber, there is a premium on poverty, which is its extra hidden cost. People who are in poverty pay more through costly tariffs, prepayment meters and high credit rates. The University of Bristol has calculated that poverty premium at £242 million for Scotland.

As a member for the Glasgow region, I am concerned that there is no credible plan for economic growth in that city region, which has some of the highest levels of poverty. It is alarming that one in three children there lives in poverty, and that it has the highest proportion in Scotland of children in low-income families. It is remiss of the Scottish Government not to have a plan for Glasgow and the west of Scotland, because if one believes in redistribution of wealth, as I do and as the First Minister says he does, one cannot ignore the importance of an economic plan for Glasgow city and the wider region, where the level of poverty is extremely concerning.

17:05

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** As I looked up at the public gallery earlier today, I observed the expressions and reactions of the young people who were attending the Parliament, as young people often do. The young people whom I saw today were about the age that I was when this Parliament opened. At that time, we could feel the excitement and the determination to create a more socially just society and a better politics.

I still feel that optimism today, despite the challenging times that we have been through together. As I said when I first spoke to this Parliament in 2016, we share a determination for and

"a hope of a better Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2016; c 81.]

That was manifested when we passed the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, when we committed

together to targets to tackle child poverty. The onus is, of course, in many ways on the Government, but the responsibility to meet the targets is all of ours.

We have heard from members across the chamber that poverty is wrong. It is wrong; it does not need to exist here in our country in the way that it does, and we can make the changes in our constituencies to ensure that, in generations to come, the MSPs who sit in this chamber do not face the same challenges in relation to poverty that we do today. I certainly want to see that for my constituents, and I know that every other member here does, too.

We share the responsibility not just for action but for how we got here. Yes, it is fair and reasonable in our democracy for the Opposition to critique and criticise the Government's positions and decisions, but it is a fact that the decisions of decades past have an impact on where we are now. It is a fact that the mandate that the Labour Party had during the new Labour years could have been used to greater effect. It is a fact that the coalition Government between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives brought about austerity measures that have had an impact on poverty. It is a fact that Brexit has made our economy poorer.

Those circumstances, the shared challenges that we faced together with regard to the Covid pandemic and the consequences of the war in Ukraine have all had an impact for which we share responsibility. That is the context and those are the challenges that we share.

However, we will not benefit from a tribal approach as we go forward, and, in that spirit, it is right that we critique where we are now. We do that better by acknowledging success when it is achieved and by putting forward constructive suggestions about how we move forward, considering where power lies in terms of the Parliaments and constitutional framework of this country.

The achievements of Social Security Scotland are remarkable, and I feel proud and privileged to have been part of that project for some time as a minister. Those achievements are down to a huge number of officials who do remarkable work day in, day out to serve people, which they do really well.

There are practical challenges when it comes to undertaking new constitutional responsibilities and delivering new services. That is a reality, and we do better as democrats to be realistic about that challenge, as well as to be ambitious. Therefore, criticising the Scottish Government for delay because of the pandemic or being unfairly negative about the Government's delivery of social

security since the Smith commission and the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 does not serve well any constituents who we represent.

The Scottish child payment is a hugely impactful policy, and it is one that the cabinet secretary conceived when she was the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People. We all know the impact that it is having. If members go around any communities in the constituencies that they represent, they will hear people feeding back about the difference that the payment and its increase by 150 per cent has made, especially at this time. We should be proud of that achievement and build on it.

In that spirit, I would like to make two small suggestions on the way forward for the Government and Parliament to consider. I welcome the appointment of the Minister for Housing because it is an important remit, particularly at the moment. I urge the Government to consider whether more direct capital spending can be allocated to high-pressure housing areas such as here in the capital city, where the demand for social housing is extraordinarily high and has been for some time. I look forward to constructive engagement on that as well as a continuance of measures around how we bring about a better deal for tenants. I also welcome the Government's commitments on that.

To the Parliament, I say this: there has been a lot of discussion today about work and what we can do to help people to make the journey out of poverty. We can surely collaborate behind a call for employment law and in-work benefits such as universal credit to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Think of the impact that we could make together to address poverty in our country if we had those extra levers. There is a shared enthusiasm in the Parliament for that, so let us collaborate and make it happen in the shared spirit of a national mission to tackle poverty in our country. Surely that is something that we can get behind to achieve good outcomes. Would that not be a wonderful thing?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We now move to closing speeches and I call Alex Cole-Hamilton to speak on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

17:11

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I apologise for not pressing my button and giving Daniel Johnson the impression that he was next.

I start by paying tribute to Ben Macpherson. I might not agree with everything that he has just said, but I do not doubt the power of his words and the contribution that he has made to public life

since he was first elected in 2016. Ben and I share a constituency boundary and I look forward to hearing more of his contributions unencumbered by ministerial collective responsibility in the future. I also thank him for his contribution to this debate.

Claire Baker quite rightly used the word “dignity”, and allowing families and people—our constituents—the right to that dignity of which so many are deprived by the man-made creation of poverty is at the heart of this debate. We need to remember that poverty is a man-made creation. As Ben Macpherson rightly said, we are all responsible for using our collective will and might to end that man-made spectre.

There will always be areas on which we agree; there is no doubt about that. Let me say from the outset that I want this Government to succeed. This Government has embarked upon many avenues and ventures that I think are wrong-headed and not the priorities for our people, but on this I agree with the Government. We will always support aspects of policy that we can get behind if we see that there is a line of sight to it achieving the abolition of the spectre of poverty. The child payment is exactly one of those policies. I echo some of the concerns that Jeremy Balfour rightly raised when he talked about the amount of time that it has taken to get that payment to people, but I do not denigrate its existence. I congratulate the Government on it and am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her remarks.

I was quite taken by Bob Doris’s remarks about a supplementary payment that can be made over the summer. That idea would bear more scrutiny.

We live in a changing world, which makes our work to end the spectre of poverty that much harder, and sometimes things are beyond our control. On 22 February 2022, a muzzle flash shifted the world on its axis with the illegal invasion of Ukraine. It showed us with stark clarity how exposed we are to energy insecurity, which was, in itself, a massive turbocharge to the poverty that we all seek to address. I hope that we have learned a lesson from our exposure to global shocks in the energy market.

We have an answer to that in Scotland by aspiring as much as we can to make every home that is occupied by our constituents a warm home. Right now, that is not the case, and we know that. We have that in granular detail, and we need to address that reality if we are going to drive down fuel bills as well as meeting our climate obligations. For all the challenges that we face, we cannot lose sight of the fact that our world is still on fire.

As I said in my opening remarks, 874,000 households in this country live in fuel poverty and we are nowhere near touching the sides. Last

year, only 5,000 homes were helped to improve their insulation measures—that is 0.6 per cent. We must exponentially ramp up our efforts. Miles Briggs was quite right to say that we should focus first on those who have caring responsibilities, particularly for end-of-life care. I visited St Columba’s hospice yesterday and heard about the exponential growth of the hospice-at-home service and the impact that increased fuel costs have on that.

Although I did not agree with everything that Stephen Kerr said, he is partially right in saying that poverty is intergenerational and that work and social mobility are the fastest routes out. However, getting into work is problematic in and of itself if the childcare that someone relies on to attend evening courses or job interviews is not available. We do not have flexibility in our childcare sector. The Government’s current aspiration to provide 1,140 hours of free childcare is too inflexible and can be inaccessible for parents who are adrift of the labour market. It equates only to the duration of the school day, falling short of full-time working hours, and prevents primary caregivers, who are typically women, working full time.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that 25 per cent of parents living in absolute poverty in Scotland have given up work, that a third have turned down a job and that a further 25 per cent have not been able to take up education or training as a result of childcare problems. That is why our amendment calls on the Government to immediately increase payment rates to protect the future of third sector and private providers.

During his campaign to become First Minister, Humza Yousaf promised an expansion of early learning and childcare, which is something that has long been championed by my party. We have said for years that funded childcare should dovetail with maternity and paternity leave. We need big plans for infrastructure and staffing, but the problems of the existing roll-out must also be fixed and lessons must be learned for what comes next.

Thanks again to campaigning by my party, two-year-olds from poorer backgrounds are entitled to free early learning and child care. That was a big Liberal offer, but the Scottish Government is still messing up the roll-out and Scotland is miles behind England in uptake. Childcare should be helping with the cost of living crisis and with raising attainment, so why are 8,000 of Scotland’s poorest families still missing out on that? For the families of three and four-year-olds, the offer of free hours is all too often a “take it or leave it” one, with the promised flexibility and choice just not there. Instead of being able to fit childcare around work and other commitments, parents all too often find that it is the other way round. They are

essentially being told that it is not the Government's problem if they cannot make the set hours work, because the offer of 1,140 hours is there.

I understand that I must conclude soon. We need a new funding formula that will ensure that the private, voluntary and independent early years sector is not left at a disadvantage. Look at childminding, where 10,000 places have been lost in the past five years. That sector should be thriving but instead is being squeezed. The current formula funnels experienced staff away from all private settings into council nurseries by paying them more to do the same job there.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Cole-Hamilton, I thought that you were concluding.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** I will conclude now; thank you for reminding me. We cannot forget those small private and voluntary nurseries.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I now call Daniel Johnson to wind up on behalf of Scottish Labour.

17:18

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** I am sorry for my earlier impetuosity, when I tried to steal Alex Cole-Hamilton's time.

I will begin with Ben Macpherson's challenge, because it is an important one. We must look ahead and use this place to find new solutions and new ways of thinking. However, I gently ask whether that is what the Government is doing today.

Mr Macpherson is also right in saying that it is incumbent on the Government to use the power of the Administration behind it to do that heavy lifting. We have had a so-called refresh today, but what is new? What has changed? What are the new ideas? When we have a programme for government, we usually have a long list of Government bills to come, but the Government mentioned only two bills today. If members do not want to take my word for it, they should just look at the BBC's coverage of today's big relaunch and reboot. What is the BBC covering? It is covering two things, both of which are things that the Government is scrapping, not new things that it is doing.

This is a big problem that requires urgent action at significant scale, but the solutions are just not forthcoming from the Government. This is not a reset or a refresh; it is just a restatement. We only have to look at the Government's motion to see that, because there are no new ideas, just repetition of things that it has done before.

The reality is that the Government is on pause, and it has been on pause since mid-February. Despite the election of a new First Minister, it cannot get going again. It is like a rabbit that is stuck in the headlights, frozen in fear, with a crisis surrounding the party. That is why there is simply rhetoric, not action, despite the calls made by the Poverty Alliance today.

**Bob Doris:** I recall hearing members from all parties giving ideas of what they would do further to tackle poverty in Scotland. Daniel Johnson has not given any policies or ideas yet—could he give some?

**Daniel Johnson:** I am barely two minutes in. Mr Doris should be patient—I will get to the ideas.

All that the Government has really announced today is a talking shop, and, as Paul O'Kane pointed out, that is simply not good enough, as urgent action is required. Mr Cole-Hamilton was absolutely right to point to the urgent need to address fuel poverty. Ultimately, if there is one lesson from soaring energy prices, it is that we need to help people to get off gas. We need to help them to heat their homes more efficiently, and that requires urgent action both right now, with insulation, and in broader steps to get people on to more sustainable heating methods. Where are the solutions on that from the Government? There is an idea for Mr Doris—we could look at that. I will come to other ideas further on in my speech. Simply having a talking shop or summit will not do it.

The most interesting point in the discussion arose between Stephen Kerr, Fulton MacGregor and Claire Baker. We cannot just examine the symptoms of poverty. If there is one small bit on which I can agree with Mr Kerr, it is that we need to consider the root causes, but we do not do that by ignoring the deep structural causes of poverty even among those who are in work. Both Fulton MacGregor and Claire Baker did an excellent job on that. It is not simply about providing access to jobs. If it was that simple, we would have solved poverty in recent months, given the tight labour market. There are structural issues that prevent people from accessing that work, including those involving the childcare that can enable people to access work or undertake training to take higher-paid jobs. Here is another idea for Mr Doris: we could have direct intervention that would enable people to take up the training required, beyond the traditional training that is available. That could help people to overcome the barriers that prevent them from taking better work.

In the words of John Bird, we need to “dismantle poverty”, and that requires us to acknowledge the structural problems that put it in place. We see very little from the Government that is seeking to analyse what the structural issues are, let alone

helping people to overcome them. There has been a lot of discussion about the scale of poverty but not about how we might actually help people to overcome the structural barriers that prevent them from seeking and taking up the solutions that they need to get out of it.

Ultimately, this is a debate that seeks to distract. The motion before us is virtually a copycat motion, replicating one that we debated prior to the recess. Indeed, we have another carbon-copy motion for tomorrow. That is because the Government does not actually want us to discuss any substance; it wants to distract us from the serious issues that arise. This is a rebrand, not a reset. The Government keeps talking about a fresh start and fresh thinking, but, frankly, there has been nothing forthcoming from the Government today, either from the debate and the motion before us or from the First Minister's statement earlier today.

We want real change and a real difference. Frankly, we need to get shot of the SNP and deliver a Labour Government in the UK and in Scotland, which will make a real difference and tackle the real issues, if we are to deliver real change and tackle poverty in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I encourage members who come into the chamber to desist from engaging in private conversations.

17:24

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I begin my closing remarks on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives with consensus. Supporting Scotland with the cost of living and in reducing child poverty is a key objective for all political parties. Many of us are agreed on that shared ambition today. However, how we achieve such objectives, and our policies, will differ.

Unfortunately, the SNP has an unhealthy habit of blaming everyone but itself when debating social issues. The Scottish Conservatives understand that a thriving economy is key to lifting people out of poverty, to supporting people with life challenges and to giving our young people the best possible start in life.

It is also important to recognise the powers that the Government has at its fingertips in one of the most devolved parliaments in the world. Devolution in Scotland works best when the UK and Scottish Governments work together. We saw that during the height of the pandemic, when rolling out the Covid-19 vaccine. In my view, that is the best way to support people in Scotland.

For the past 15 years, the SNP has presided over devolved powers. When it first entered office, it promised to eradicate child poverty, but, in fact,

the percentage of children in poverty has remained stable since the SNP came to power in 2007. In addition, an Audit Scotland report has said that the effects of the SNP Government's child poverty delivery plan cannot yet be assessed, despite the SNP's having launched in 2018 its four-year plan to reduce child poverty. Data is vital when addressing child poverty in Scotland, and I am beyond frustrated at the lack of data held by the Government.

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

**Meghan Gallacher:** No. I am sorry, cabinet secretary, but you did not give me that opportunity.

**Bob Doris:** Diddums.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Doris—please.

**Meghan Gallacher:** That lack of data is not good for governance nor for measuring the success of a policy. The Government should not shy away from scrutiny.

Having listened carefully to the debate, members across the chamber have reflected on the SNP's record in tackling the cost of living and child poverty. The cabinet secretary mentioned providing immediate support to break child poverty. I therefore wonder whether she agrees with the Scottish Conservatives that the roll-out of free school meals must be a priority for the Government. Poverty does not stop when children reach primary 6, and we all know that providing children with a hot meal not only helps them to concentrate at school but makes sure that they do not go home hungry. I would therefore be grateful for an update on that when the cabinet secretary sums up.

Housing is another important issue that has been raised today by many contributors. My colleague Miles Briggs was right to raise the issue of families—in particular, children—living in temporary accommodation. We should all be concerned that 9,130 children are living in temporary accommodation. That must have a negative impact on their daily lives, and I join Miles Briggs in his calls to work with the Government to tackle that issue together. He also mentioned kinship care and the need to introduce the national minimum allowance, which I and others have called on the Government to do.

Paul O'Kane mentioned the fact that independence will always be a top priority for the SNP. He is right on that point. The Government must put that obsession behind it and focus on what matters to the people of Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton raised the issues that are faced by parents—particularly mothers. He is right in saying that women are detrimentally impacted

by cost pressures, particularly if they work in the childcare sector.

Stephen Kerr mentioned tackling the root cause of poverty by creating good jobs, the provision of apprenticeships to our young people and the need to pay skilled jobs well. He also, rightly, highlighted the measures that the UK Government took during the pandemic, especially those that supported families and businesses.

Jeremy Balfour mentioned the removal of the ministerial position for social security—something that I find strange, given how important that is in supporting people.

Finally, Social Security Scotland and the many teething issues in setting up the benefits system need to be urgently addressed by the Government.

Presiding Officer, I make no apology for sounding like a broken record in raising again the SNP's flagship policy of the expansion of free childcare. It was heartening to hear so many members make reference to it today, because it is an issue that I care deeply about. It helps to lift children and families out of poverty, and we must get it right. I am pleased that Natalie Don is in the chamber—I welcome her to her role—as I wrote to her recently about working collegiately on that issue.

I also refer to the comments that were made by the First Minister in his commitment to working with the childcare sector, but I hope that that means the whole childcare sector, because we need a reset of that policy. I therefore extend that olive branch again today, and I ask that we arrange a meeting with those in the private, voluntary and independent sector to discuss the problems that the roll-out of free childcare is causing for them. Members have heard the issues that I and others have raised about the staffing crisis, council funding and PVI rates. If the private, voluntary and independent nursery settings close, the policy will fail.

We have already mentioned the 11,000 childminders. Daniel Johnson, Alex Cole-Hamilton and others raised that matter earlier. We need to encourage people into the childcare sector instead of driving them away. After all, childcare practitioners are Scotland's first educators and, if the Government is serious about tackling child poverty, that needs to happen when a child is young, in order to support parents and to ensure that any intervention that is required can happen, to give our children the best possible start in life.

All that I am asking is that the SNP get a grip on that policy. This Government can then look towards the UK Government's ambitious policy of 30 hours of free childcare a week for children from nine months old. That is how we will tackle poverty

head-on: by fixing the problems in an existing policy and then being bold and ambitious. Time will tell if the SNP is up to the challenge.

We heard earlier about the First Minister's programme for government, which has been completely overshadowed by the chaos that is engulfing the SNP. For the sake of our country, I ask the Government to put the needs of our country first, and not its own needs, and to tackle the cost of living crisis and child poverty. Only then will we see the real improvements that we really need.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to wind up the debate. Cabinet secretary, you have up to nine minutes.

17:30

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I thank members on all sides of the chamber for their contributions. It would be fair to say that we have not agreed on everything, but in the main the debate has been constructive. I think that it shows that every member in the Parliament has the best interests of the Scottish people and the people of Scotland at heart; we just disagree sometimes on how to take that forward.

As part of that, it is important that—as the First Minister said during his statement—this Government reaches out to those in opposition in the chamber, and reaches out again to stakeholders and in particular those with lived experience, to ensure that we work together to tackle child poverty and poverty as a whole. That is why the anti-poverty summit is important. I hope that, despite the cynicism and scepticism among some about that summit, Opposition leaders, or at least spokespeople, will take up the offer to attend. In the spirit of those types of meetings, I am happy to look at any invite that comes in from Miles Briggs on the issue of life-shortening illnesses, in particular among children.

During the debate, there has—quite rightly—been critique and criticism of what the Government has done and what it is determined to do. However, I think that it is important to challenge very strongly the insinuation that the First Minister lacks ambition in this area. He has been in post for just a few weeks and we have already had announcements of further increases to the fuel insecurity fund; a discussion on childcare and investment in it; information on the just transition and funds for energy transition; and further additional funding of £1 million to tackle health inequalities. Those are just some of the issues that have already been addressed, on top of what has been presented in the statement today.

**Daniel Johnson:** Any extension to child maintenance and childcare would be welcome. With regard to the £15 million that was announced today, however, there are between 350,000 and 400,000 children in primary school, so that amounts to just £40 per child. How far will that £15 million really go?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** We have demonstrated that through the important work on the pathfinder initiatives. I say to Daniel Johnson that he rose to the challenge that Bob Doris gave him and presented some ideas. A number of members presented ideas, and I say to all of them that, whether those ideas are for further work on childcare, the insulation aspects that Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned or other areas, I am more than happy—as is the First Minister—to hear constructive comments and thoughts about how we can take them forward.

This is the start of that dialogue but, although I am happy to meet Opposition spokespeople individually on some of the initiatives that they have discussed, I hope that the next step will be for us to talk about the important issue of how we fund those. As we look at what we can do, we must have a realistic debate about how that can happen within the Government. I am not closing those ideas off at this point; I simply say, “Absolutely—let’s meet and get down to the detail, past the top lines that we have had the opportunity to discuss today, and talk about how much some of those initiatives cost and where that money comes from.”

We can look at the work that the Government has already done. The Scottish child payment is but one example—it has increased by 150 per cent in eight months. As a result, we will see a reduction in relative child poverty by about 5 per cent in 2023-24.

However, context is everything, and people, particularly the Scottish Conservatives, may criticise the Government for pointing to it, but it is a matter of fact that, while we make decisions on the Scottish child payment, decisions that are taken elsewhere push children and families into poverty. We will do what we can with the powers that we have to lift them out of poverty, but when the UK Government makes changes to welfare reforms and reduces universal credit by £20 a week, that pushes the same people back into poverty. We cannot ignore that, because to do so would be a dereliction of our duties and responsibilities.

This is the start of a dialogue. We get criticised for the fact that we are debating poverty measures again, but we also get criticised for not debating poverty measures enough. I am not entirely sure whether we are talking about it too much or whether we are not talking about it enough, but the Government will continue to reach out and speak

to people, and we will also continue to make a real change in people’s lives.

Another aspect that we have talked about is the impact of high energy costs. It is a deep disappointment that the UK Government has ended the energy bill support scheme. The people of Scotland are living in that context. We will do what we can through the child winter heating allowance, winter heating payments and the fuel insecurity fund, for example.

Many members mentioned housing and homelessness—quite rightly—and we are taking those issues forward as a priority. The minister for housing will continue important work to achieve the vision that is set out in the ending homelessness together action plan so that everyone in Scotland can have a settled home that is high quality and affordable, and that will be supported with funding of £100 million.

Employment is also a very important aspect that we need to talk about. To truly tackle poverty, we must ensure that we have long-term, sustainable improvement to household income; that means people in employment with good, fair wages. That is why the Government supports the real living wage, unlike the UK Government, which has a national living wage that is too low and does not reflect the cost of living. During his very informed speech, Ben Macpherson once again suggested the devolution of employment law. We should look at that.

The one point on which I have consensus with Stephen Kerr is that we should look at the causes of poverty, but I say respectfully to him that one of the root causes of poverty in Scotland lies with the Scottish Conservatives because of the impact that the UK Government has on Scottish people.

As we look to what more we can do, we will hold the poverty summit, because it is important that we listen more to people and that we pull in the talents and expertise not only within the Scottish Government—my party—but across the chamber and in local government, national Government, business and the third sector. They should all work together. We also need to challenge ourselves on how innovative we can be, through our commitment to the minimum income guarantee, for example.

I am also looking forward to my work with the Scottish Greens, and with Maggie Chapman, in particular. I am sure that she and I can build the same positive, constructive relationship that I had with my friend and colleague Ross Greer working on education. I look forward to working with her on mitigation which, unfortunately, the Government has to deal with a lot due to the context that we are in.

A number of members—Pauline McNeill, Fulton MacGregor and Ruth Maguire—raised important points about intergenerational poverty and those who are struggling most; that is very important and we need to look at it.

Some members are still concerned about the make-up of the Government and the fact that there is no social security minister; well, can I introduce you to the social security minister? She is right here; she is in the Cabinet and she is dealing with social security. I remember that, when Ben Macpherson got into post, he was criticised for being a junior minister because we had demoted the issue, and now people are somehow concerned that the role is back at Cabinet level again. Can we get some perspective that this is a priority for Government? It will continue to be a priority for me.

I say respectfully to Jeremy Balfour—who I have worked well with in the past and hope to work with again in future—that, although he is here to hold the Scottish Government to account, he is also here to represent the people of Scotland. That means standing up against the UK Government, Jeremy, when it does things wrong. My goodness in my area it does plenty wrong to criticise.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I am afraid that I have to close, or I genuinely would have taken the intervention. My apologies, Jeremy.

The Government has vowed to do everything that it can do tackle poverty. We will continue to work closely with our partners in local government, the third sector, businesses and communities to listen to people—particularly those with direct experience—and we will continue to do everything that we can to build a better Scotland for us all by making our communities and households more resilient and able to flourish by ensuring that everyone in the country has a bright future.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, cabinet secretary. I know that we are pressed for time, but full names would be appreciated.

That concludes the debate on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty.

## Business Motion

17:40

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-08614, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Wednesday 19 April 2023—

after

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

insert

*followed by*                      Ministerial Statement: Challenge to the  
UK Government's Section 35 Order on  
the Gender Recognition Reform  
(Scotland) Bill

(b) Thursday 20 April 2023—

delete

2.30 pm                      Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm                      Portfolio Questions:  
Social Justice, Housing and Local  
Government

and insert

2.00 pm                      Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm                      Portfolio Questions:  
Social Justice, Housing and Local  
Government

*followed by*                      Ministerial Statement: Deposit Return  
Scheme—[George Adam]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:40

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-08615, on committee membership, and S6M-08616, on substitution on committees.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Stuart McMillan be appointed to replace Siobhian Brown as a member of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Kaukab Stewart as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Bill Kidd be appointed to replace Graeme Dey as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Kaukab Stewart be appointed to replace Joe FitzPatrick as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Clare Haughey be appointed to replace Gillian Martin as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Paul McLennan as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Christine Grahame be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Collette Stevenson be appointed to replace Natalie Don as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Gordon MacDonald be appointed to replace Emma Roddick as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed to replace Paul McLennan as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Emma Harper be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Rona Mackay be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Kaukab Stewart as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Bob Doris be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Natalie Don as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Audrey Nicoll be appointed to replace Graeme Dey as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Ash Regan be appointed to replace Stuart McMillan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.—[George Adam]

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

## Decision Time

17:41

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-08589.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

17:41

*Meeting suspended.*

17:45

*On resuming—*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the division on amendment S6M-08589.1, in the name of Miles Briggs. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

### For

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

### Against

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

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 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)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

### Abstentions

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

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08589.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 26, Against 84, Abstentions 3.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-08589.3, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

### For

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

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 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)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

#### Abstentions

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

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08589.3, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 17, Against 94, Abstentions 3.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-08589.2, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

#### For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 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)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)

Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08589.2, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, is: For 20, Against 94, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on supporting Scotland with the cost of living and reducing child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

#### For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

### Abstentions

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

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on motion S6M-08589, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, is: For 67, Against 30, Abstentions 17.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament commits to continuing the national mission on tackling child poverty; acknowledges that the most recent poverty statistics remain too high and that all levels of government must take action to reduce poverty and inequality in society; recognises the pressure being placed on household finances due to rising inflation, high energy bills and soaring increases to food costs, and that this cost of living crisis disproportionately impacts households on low incomes and is likely to exacerbate unacceptably high levels of child poverty; welcomes plans for an anti-poverty summit to guide future action on tackling poverty; acknowledges the significant action that the Scottish Government has already taken to tackle the cost of living and child poverty, including the tripling of the Fuel Insecurity Fund, expanding and increasing the value of the Scottish Child Payment and introducing new family benefits, mitigating the benefit cap as far as possible within devolved powers, the provision of 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, and offering universal free school meals to all pupils in P1 to P5, and calls on the UK Government to match the ambition shown by the Scottish Government and reverse the harmful welfare reform policies implemented since 2015, which would lift an estimated 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty in Scotland in 2023-24.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I propose to ask a single question on the two Parliamentary Bureau motions, if no member objects.

The final question is, that motions S6M-08615, on committee membership, and S6M-08616, on committee substitution, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

#### *Motions agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Stuart McMillan be appointed to replace Siobhian Brown as a member of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Kaukab Stewart as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Bill Kidd be appointed to replace Graeme Dey as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Kaukab Stewart be appointed to replace Joe FitzPatrick as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Clare Haughey be appointed to replace Gillian Martin as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Paul McLennan as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Christine Grahame be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Collette Stevenson be appointed to replace Natalie Don as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Gordon MacDonald be appointed to replace Emma Roddick as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed to replace Paul McLennan as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Emma Harper be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Rona Mackay be appointed to replace Jenni Minto as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Ben Macpherson be appointed to replace Kaukab Stewart as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Bob Doris be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Natalie Don as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Audrey Nicoll be appointed to replace Graeme Dey as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Ash Regan be appointed to replace Stuart McMillan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time. We will move on shortly to members' business. I ask members who are leaving the chamber to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

## Wear a Hat Day 2023

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The final item of business is a members' business debate, on motion S6M-07890, in the name of Emma Harper, on wear a hat day 2023. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the importance of Wear A Hat Day, taking place on 31 March 2023, in raising awareness of brain tumours; understands that brain tumours are the biggest killer of children and adults under 40 with cancer in Scotland, reducing life expectancy by 20 years on average; believes that this is the highest life expectancy reduction of any cancer, but that the treatment and understanding of brain tumours are 20 years behind those relating to more common cancers; notes that brain tumours often cause side effects that have a severe impact on a person's quality of life; understands that there are over 130 different types of brain tumour, and that some symptoms of brain tumours can mimic other equally serious conditions, which often renders early diagnosis and treatment more difficult in many cases; further understands that brain tumour charities, such as the Brain Tumour Charity, are working hard to fund pioneering research, raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of brain tumours, and provide support to people affected by brain tumours; commends the success of national campaigns, which it considers have contributed to a reduction in the average diagnosis time for childhood brain tumours, from 9.1 to 6.5 weeks, since 2011; believes that national campaigns are a basis on which to develop further awareness; notes the significant efforts of Dumfries and Galloway Medical Physics Technician, Alan Johnstone, in both raising awareness of brain tumours and funding for research and development into the causes of brain tumours, their treatment and, ultimately, a cure; understands that Alan's late wife, Anneka Johnstone, was diagnosed with a glioblastoma brain tumour and sadly died in 2019, despite being a very fit and active 33-year-old, and further understands that, despite losing Anneka, Alan has raised more than £55,000 for the Brain Tumour Charity by walking the 214-mile Southern Upland Way, videos of which were posted to Alan's TikTok account, which has attracted a huge following.

17:53

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I am pleased to have the opportunity to lead this debate to raise awareness of brain tumours, following wear a hat day on 31 March. I thank members from every party who have supported my motion, thereby allowing the debate to go ahead, and I welcome the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to her role in what is, I believe, the first members' debate that she will respond to. I also thank the Brain Tumour Charity for its continued work to raise awareness of brain tumours, its support for people who are impacted by brain tumours and their families, and its raising of vital funds for brain tumour research.

I applaud the "Better safe than tumour" campaign, which aims to support public awareness of the signs and symptoms of brain tumours, and welcome Thomas Brayford from Brain Tumour Research to the public gallery.

Brain tumours are the biggest killer by cancer of people under the age of 40 in the United Kingdom. Such tumours reduce life expectancy by an average of 20 years, which is the highest figure for any cancer that we currently know of. There are various signs and symptoms, depending on the type of brain tumour and its location, and my motion notes that there are more than 130 types of tumour of the brain.

Some symptoms might be very severe, while others might not be apparent at all. Anyone who experiences concerning signs and symptoms should first visit their general practitioner to discuss those and get further advice.

Brain tumour symptoms can include headaches that are more severe in the morning or that wake people in the night. They are usually different from headaches that the person might have had previously and will be persistent and will worsen over time. Weakness, loss of sensation or numbness are signs of pressure on or damage to a specific part of the brain.

Tumours can also be manifested through unsteady walking, lack of co-ordination and ataxia, or through muscle weakness on one side of the body, which is known as hemiparesis. Hearing loss that occurs on only one side can be a sign of acoustic neuroma. Speech difficulties may include loss of the ability to write, speak or understand words. A person might have expressive dysphasia, which is a difficulty in getting words out, or they might have difficulty articulating words, which is known as dysarthria. Other symptoms can include poor concentration, confusion, memory loss, disorientation, drowsiness and changes in behaviour.

Although the cause of brain tumours is debated, research shows that some genetic conditions that predispose a person to overproduction of certain cells and exposure to some forms of radiation are key causes.

In my time working in an operating theatre in Los Angeles, I had the privilege of working with a neurosurgeon called Dr Keith Black, who is now chair of neurosurgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where he continues his research. He was a pioneer in developing the surgery that we now know as awake craniotomy, for removal of particular tumours that occur in the speech centre of the brain. For anyone who is not squeamish and who wants to watch them, some amazing films of awake craniotomy on YouTube demonstrate how

far we have come in developing advanced surgery techniques.

Around 60 per cent of people who are diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour will die within one year and only 19 per cent will survive for five years or more. Brain tumours are one of the four cancers with a 10-year survival rate of less than 15 per cent. My Auntie Jean, who was not even 50 years old, did not survive a diagnosis of astrocytoma.

We must see change. Early diagnosis of brain tumours remains challenging, with estimates suggesting that up to 64 per cent of patients—quite a high number—are diagnosed in accident and emergency departments.

We must acknowledge that the pandemic has meant that many patients have faced disruption to their care, clinics, appointments and treatments including surgery or chemotherapy. Although the national health service took extensive steps to keep cancer services running, we know that in most areas in Scotland surgery for people living with low-grade or less aggressive brain tumours was delayed, and that the pandemic continues to have a huge impact on all aspects of our NHS.

The Brain Tumour Charity asks the Scottish Government to ensure that everyone who is diagnosed with a brain tumour can access support from a clinical nurse specialist or a key worker, regardless of their tumour type or where they live. It also asks the Scottish Government to drive earlier diagnosis by committing to reducing the proportion of brain tumours that are diagnosed in A and E and by piloting a promising new blood test—developed by researchers at the universities of Strathclyde and Edinburgh—in primary care across Scotland as soon as possible in order to explore its potential to triage people who have symptoms.

The charity also asks the Government to accelerate access to real-world data for Scottish brain tumour patients, cancer researchers and charities, including through the use of BRIAN, which is the Brain Tumour Charity's patient-led app. The charity also asks the Government to ensure that brain tumour research and the development of treatments and therapies are equitable with those for other cancers. It is welcome that the First Minister has given a commitment to ensuring that brain tumour detection is improved in Scotland so that people have the best possible opportunity of recovery. That includes use of fast-track diagnostic centres, such as the one that was opened in Dumfries and Galloway in my South Scotland region in 2021.

Finally, I will talk about Alan and Anneka Johnstone. Anneka died on 18 November 2019 due to a short battle with glioblastoma. I knew

Anneka—she was a kind, caring and compassionate dietician in NHS Dumfries and Galloway. We worked together when I was a clinical educator, and she gave me lots of advice for patients with complex dietary needs and supported me as I was developing training for nurses. Since Anneka passed, her husband Alan has raised more than £57,000 for the Brain Tumour Charity by walking 214 miles of the southern upland way—[*Interruption.*]

I did not think that I would be upset.

In Anneka's memory, Alan has raised £57,000. That is a challenge that he said was tough, but it was one that was, in his words, easy compared with what Anneka went through. His charity fundraising has been invaluable for research and development.

I look forward to hearing colleagues speak. I repeat my asks of the minister and I thank Alan Johnstone for his hugely important fundraising work following his tragic loss. I also repeat the message from the Brain Tumour Charity to be "Better safe than tumour" and to ensure that symptoms are addressed urgently.

18:01

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I thank Emma Harper for bringing this critically important debate before us today. Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and to Emma Harper for not being able to stay to the end of the meeting because I have a committee that is meeting to take evidence at half past 6.

Diagnosis times and the treatment of brain tumours have made leaps and bounds in recent years, thanks to incredible achievements in research. This debate gives us an important opportunity to acknowledge just how far life-saving treatment has progressed and to recognise and thank researchers, medical professionals, campaigners and volunteers for their individual work in improving the lives of people who are affected by brain tumours, and the lives of their families and loved ones.

It is clear that rigorous national campaigning has made the availability of support possible, but while awareness of brain tumours is at an all-time high, we must continue to keep that vitally important campaign on the political agenda in order to build on our recent achievements.

Much has since changed since the topic of brain tumours was last debated in the chamber in 2017. Our health landscape has changed dramatically—not least, due to the pandemic, which saw charities and voluntary organisations experience significant loss of income, and those organisations are now struggling more due to the cost of living

crisis. That is why it is crucial that we listen carefully to the policies and recommendations of charities such as the Brain Tumour Charity, as well as to the lived experience of people who are affected by this complex disease.

Although the charities have been leading on the campaign, it is critical that Governments across the four nations provide much-needed support by treating brain tumour research as a critical priority. Campaigners have been asking for more Government support to build research capacity, so I am delighted that Scotland continues to build on its reputation as a hub of transformative world-class research into brain tumours, with institutions such as the brain tumour centre of excellence at the University of Edinburgh leading the way. I give my full backing to campaign calls of experts, researchers and charities, including on the need for more research funding and the importance of early diagnosis.

I was pleased to see the Government's announcement on Scotland's new cancer strategy, which has the potential to be a major milestone for people who are affected by brain tumours. I have full confidence that the minister, under our new Government, will use the findings from a cancer strategy consultation to effectively inform the decision-making process. We cannot underestimate the importance of ensuring that the voices and experience of people who are affected by brain tumours are at the heart of the policy. Many of our constituents are impacted by cancer, so it is critical that they be at the centre of our approach going forward.

The Scottish Parliament's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, of which I am a member, recently concluded an inquiry into health inequalities, during which we heard evidence that health inequalities not only contribute to the development of cancer but impact on what treatment a patient can access and the ability to access support, overall. That is an important point that has been raised constantly by the Brain Tumour Charity, which found that inequalities in brain tumour trials due to poor health and to cost implications present a barrier to patients entering clinical studies. It is absolutely essential that minorities and people who live in deprived areas across Scotland are included in the clinical trials in order that we better understand their experience of the current system and what improvements need to be made.

As the motion recognises, the side effects of brain tumour treatment can have a severe impact on a person's quality of life.

I am incredibly proud of the array of services that are available across my constituency, including those that are provided by Maggie's Fife and the Brain Tumour Charity support group,

which provide invaluable support to people who are affected by cancer, including people with brain tumours.

The three early cancer diagnostic centres that have been introduced—in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, and NHS Fife—speed up cancer diagnosis and provide GPs with an alternative route to urgently refer patients. Those centres are picking up cancer earlier. Patients presenting with non-specific symptoms can be more difficult to diagnose, and some symptoms, or combinations of symptoms, can have a range of potential causes, not all of which are cancer. Where cancer is the cause, increased time being taken to diagnose a patient can often result in poorer outcomes. Figures up to October 2022 show that the initiative is working, with around 16 per cent of referrals going on to be diagnosed with cancer, and around 20 per cent being referred to primary care for non-cancer-related treatment. Referral for tests to check for cancer is an anxious time for patients and families. The centres provide a clinically safe and effective rapid service to rule out or rule in cancer.

The Scottish health awards are the most prestigious and recognised awards for people who work across NHS Scotland and its partners to deliver high-quality healthcare and social care services to people in Scotland. I was pleased that NHS Fife's rapid cancer diagnostic service team was shortlisted at last year's awards ceremony, in the innovation category. That is much-deserved recognition of all the team's work.

Changes cannot come soon enough in terms of better outcomes for people who are impacted by brain tumours and for their loved ones. It is reassuring to hear that members across the chamber are united in a shared vision to cure all types of brain tumours and to raise awareness of such an important cause.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Paul Sweeney, to be followed by Beatrice Wishart.

18:06

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank Ms Harper for bringing the motion to Parliament on wear a hat day 2023, which is for Brain Tumour Research. I also thank the member for delivering such an emotive and powerful speech at the outset of the debate. It is welcome that we have time in the chamber to discuss the impact of this disease and the importance of research into brain tumours in Scotland, and across the United Kingdom. As is mentioned in the member's motion, brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer, with one in three people knowing someone who has been impacted by a brain tumour.

However, despite that prevalence and the harrowing impact of this cancer, to date, just 1 per cent of the national expenditure on cancer research has been committed to brain tumour research. Brain Tumour Research, the charity behind wear a hat day, is calling for an increase in the national research investment to £35 million per year so that work can continue to find a cure for all kinds of brain tumours.

With 16,000 people diagnosed with a brain tumour each year across the UK, our approach to treatment and research must show ambition. I commend Brain Tumour Research for its centre of excellence strategy, which is building capacity and pioneering research through four specialist centres across the UK. It is crucial that research into brain tumours is properly funded so that that valuable work can continue and so that we can continue to further develop research and treatment here in Scotland, too. That includes building on the centre of excellence model, as exists at the Institute of Neurological Sciences in Glasgow, which was founded in 1966 and is scheduled for a major new redevelopment by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Let us look at the opportunity that that proposed investment could present for transforming research into brain tumours in Scotland.

Research into the treatment of tumours is one important aspect of improving the options and support that are available to people living with brain tumours and other types of cancer. Another crucial aspect is the availability of psychological support for people who have received a devastating cancer diagnosis, and for their families. A cancer diagnosis is transformative in a deeply distressing way at any time in a person's life, but brain tumours in particular kill more children and young people than any other cancer, and a diagnosis at a young age can come with its own unique concerns and challenges.

At present, there are two specialist psychologists for young people with cancer in Scotland—one in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and one in NHS Grampian. Given that 200 young people are diagnosed with cancer every year in Scotland, there is simply not sufficient or equal access to specialist mental health support for patients across the country. I hope that the minister will address that point in her remarks. For the 200 young people in that situation, the distress that is caused is absolutely appalling.

In considering the unequal access to support in this context, it is important for us to recognise, as part of the debate, the wider inequalities around the prevalence and treatment of cancer that exist in Scotland. Recent Public Health Scotland data showed that the overall risk of developing cancer was 30 per cent higher in the most deprived parts

of the country than in the least deprived parts. We also know that the most recent data shows that almost one in three suspected people with cancer was not treated in line with the Scottish Government's two-month target time in the final quarter of 2022. Indeed, the last time that the 62-day target was met was in 2012. It is therefore abundantly clear that access to support and treatment for people with cancer is not consistent or reliable.

I would be grateful if the minister would outline in her closing remarks her plans for funding brain tumour research for the future and how she plans to tackle the cancer inequalities of today so that everyone in Scotland has equal access to psychological support and treatment, regardless of their postcode.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I must apologise to Dr Gulhane for not following the correct order of speakers. I now call Sandesh Gulhane, after whom I will call Beatrice Wishart. I also apologise to her.

18:10

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** Labour tried to take minutes earlier, and it managed to do so that time.

I thank Emma Harper for bringing this debate to the chamber and for her personal and passionate story. I brought my best pink hat to wear in the chamber today but, sadly, it is not allowed here, so I do not have it. However, I showed it to Emma Harper.

Brain cancer is one of six common cancers with very poor survival rates. We call brain, lung, liver, oesophagus, pancreas and stomach cancers less survivable cancers, as their average five-year survival rate is just 16 per cent. Each year, more than 9,000 people will be diagnosed with one of those cancers in Scotland. That is a quarter of all cancer diagnoses cases. Those six cancers account for 40 per cent of all cancer deaths and claim more than 7,000 lives annually in Scotland.

As a general practitioner, I might see up to two patients throughout my whole practising career who are diagnosed with a brain tumour. Identifying those one or two patients early is really difficult because early symptoms, such as headaches or feeling sick, can be really vague and can have 10 or 20 different explanations. Sometimes patients present with convulsions. However, the vast majority of patients with headaches or epilepsy do not have a brain tumour.

One of the first things that GPs are taught is that common things are common—in other words, we should not jump to brain tumour if someone has a headache because, more often than not, it will be

a migraine or simply a headache. However, that is no comfort to those whose symptoms get worse and who develop muscle weakness and have problems with balance, vision, hearing or speech. They might lose their sense of smell, become confused or suffer personality change. Some may go on to be diagnosed with brain cancer but, sadly, that is often very late.

I have spoken with Heather Dearie from Ayr, who went to her GP back in 2008 complaining of fainting, chronic headaches and vision problems. Her GP diagnosed migraine and then stress—she was a student at the time—but her condition worsened, and she was at her wits' end. Eighteen months and five different GPs later, she was referred to the ear, nose and throat team. It found nothing wrong with her ears, but it thought that an MRI would be prudent. That is when her tumour was found.

Heather required emergency surgery to relieve pressure on her brain from a build-up of fluid. The 18-month wait from first presenting to her GP to diagnosis meant that it was too late for any alternative treatment to surgery. That surgery came with side effects. It left her with facial paralysis, partial deafness, balance and vision issues, nerve damage, fatigue and muscle spasms. Heather constantly suffers with pain.

For the first three years after surgery, Heather had very little in the way of peer support. She just did not know where to turn. However, she is amazing. She campaigns tirelessly as a patient advocate to raise awareness of brain cancer. Earlier this month, she received an award from the Brain Tumour Charity for her efforts.

What can we learn from Heather's experience and the experiences of countless others? I can think of an action that would make a difference. In primary care, a non-invasive test that flags up biomarkers for brain tumours is needed. That would identify patients who may be at risk and require a referral for medical radiography. If a patient's symptoms persist, GPs are more likely to do a blood test than to refer for an MRI or CT scan, given the pressure on radiology departments. Most of us in primary care cannot order or request a CT or MRI brain scan.

Brain tumours kill more patients under the age of 40 than any other cancer, and they kill more children than leukaemia. Brain tumours kill more women under 35 than breast cancer, and they kill more men under 70 than prostate cancer.

We need to get real about research. I request that the Scottish Government carries out research into brain tumours and other less survivable cancers as a clinical priority. We need a strategic plan for resourcing and funding discovery, translation and clinical research, and we need to

ensure that a robust system of tissue collection is in place for cell line isolation and biobanking. The Government should also ensure that access to clinical trials, which are key to developing new brain tumour therapies, is available.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a practising GP in the national health service.

18:15

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I thank Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I also thank all those colleagues who took part in the wear a hat day photo call that was hosted for Brain Tumour Research on 16 March and those who came along to the drop-in session afterwards. Raising awareness is so important.

Members might be aware of the proposal for a cross-party group on brain tumours, which Jim Fairlie and I hope to develop. I encourage colleagues to join us. The group would bring together people with lived experience of brain tumours and key stakeholders to try to influence policy and research. We know that, every year in Scotland, around 1,000 people are diagnosed with brain tumours and, sadly, around 470 people die from them.

Brain Tumour Research is a cancer charity that I hold particularly close to my heart. One of my daughters—Louise—lives with a brain tumour, and has done so for several years. Following surgery, she continues to receive care and to have regular check-ups. I thank the NHS for that.

Louise has suffered from migraines all her adult life. She presented to her GP for about a year with non-specific symptoms, including the sensation of something in her head when she was walking. Following what we thought was a particularly excruciating migraine, she ended up in hospital after a blue-light trip to an accident and emergency department. I thought that she had had a stroke. Eventually, after numerous scans and being flown by air ambulance to Aberdeen, she received the diagnosis of a low-grade brain tumour—a meningioma.

That leads me to concerns about how much longer such a diagnosis might take today, as the NHS's recovery from Covid continues, with pressure on primary care and a shortage of GPs. Emma Harper's motion makes the point that some symptoms can

“mimic other equally serious conditions”,

which makes early diagnosis and treatment more difficult. As a family, we are only too well aware of how fortunate Louise is compared with too many other patients.

Louise keeps up to date with news from Brain Tumour Research, so when she received notification about today's debate inviting people to contact their MSP, she emailed me to ask whether she should email me.

The charity's manifesto, "Together we will find a cure", calls on the Scottish Government to invest more in brain tumour research to find a cure; to improve patient experience and outcomes; to drive clinical trials in Scotland to bring new treatments from the laboratory bench to patients; to provide clinicians in Scotland with more time to participate in research; and to drive improvements in patient experience across NHS Scotland.

The Brain Tumour Research centre of excellence at the University of Plymouth is making progress in diagnosing meningiomas through a non-invasive blood test. That would spare future patients having to undergo invasive surgery. Such research and clinical trials could be undertaken in Scotland to improve early diagnosis and find treatments for patients.

Historically, there has been underfunding of research into brain tumours, with just 1 per cent of the national spend on cancer research having been allocated to them, so let us work together to support the work of charities and other organisations such as Brain Tumour Research and close the care gap.

18:19

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I welcome the minister to her new role; I have no doubt that she will be cracking in it. I also welcome the opportunity to participate in this very important debate, and I congratulate my friend and colleague Emma Harper on securing it.

I thank Alan Johnstone, who is one of Emma Harper's constituents, for the tremendous work that he has done to raise awareness of brain tumours and to fundraise for research into, and development of, treatment for them.

As members have indicated, brain tumours are the largest killer by cancer of children and adults under the age of 40 in the UK. Brain tumours reduce life expectancy by an average of 20 years. That is the highest figure for any cancer that we currently know of. I want all those with a brain tumour to have the best possible chance of survival, so I am pleased to support wear a hat day and the calls from the Brain Tumour Charity that my colleague Emma Harper has outlined.

One in six respondents to the Brain Tumour Charity's improving brain tumour care survey last year had to wait more than six months to get a diagnosis after first seeing a healthcare professional about their symptoms, and one in 10

waited for over a year to be diagnosed. Although I acknowledge some of the reasons for that—not least the huge challenges that are still being felt in our NHS due to the pandemic—we need to see early diagnosis and earlier access to treatment. People who display symptoms of a brain tumour should receive a definitive diagnosis as quickly as possible after first visiting a healthcare professional about their symptoms. Unfortunately, there will always be folk who will go through accident and emergency to get a diagnosis because there will always be folk whose very first symptom is a seizure or something major that requires emergency treatment. However, many things can be done to help to drive down diagnosis times for the majority of folk who will experience the symptoms of a brain tumour in the future.

Simply put, the main benefit of a faster diagnosis is that treatment, care and support can be provided to folk at the earliest opportunity, which could lead to their living better lives after their diagnosis. I would therefore welcome an update from the minister on the Scottish Government's commitment to improve the time that it takes for brain tumour diagnosis, when the fast-track cancer diagnosis centre in NHS Grampian will be fully operational, and when it will report on its effectiveness.

Brain tumours have a very real human impact. I want to discuss the experience of Suzanne Davies, who is one of my constituents. Suzanne received her diagnosis of a glioblastoma—I apologise if I did not pronounce that properly—brain tumour in 2014. She now works with Brain Tumour Research, after defying the odds of survival, to raise awareness of the disease. She is a mum to two teenagers, who were just four and seven when she received her diagnosis.

After initially visiting her doctor due to suffering from headaches and speech issues and being told that they could be down to her hay fever or stress, Suzanne visited another GP, who sent her to Aberdeen royal infirmary. It gave her a CT scan and found a tumour the size of a golf ball. She underwent an awake craniotomy, and the operating team successfully removed 95 per cent of the tumour. She then underwent chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She now has an MRI scan every six months. The most recent scan, in December last year, was stable. In February this year, Suzanne walked 10,000 steps each day to raise funds for brain tumour research. She raised a total of £706; the original target was just £500. I thank Suzanne for all her efforts, and I wish her every success for the future.

I again welcome this debate, and I thank Emma Harper for bringing it to the chamber.

18:24

**Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** Wear a hat day is a flagship campaign of Brain Tumour Research. It forms an integral part of brain tumour awareness month and it is now in its 14th year. Over the years, it has raised more than £2 million.

I thank my colleague Emma Harper for bringing this important issue to the Parliament and for sharing her personal story. One of my aunties is in Turkey at the moment getting private treatment for a brain tumour. She is about 30 or 32 years old.

I commend the great work of fundraisers. Every penny raised means that more important research can be done, bringing us closer to a cure.

Historically, there has been significant underfunding of research into brain tumours. In the past 12 years, the charity Brain Tumour Research has provided funding in excess of £15 million to early-stage science. Since 2009, it has been doing tremendous work helping to develop the next generation of researchers through its centres of excellence and it has campaigned tirelessly to improve clinical outcomes for brain tumour patients. However, more support needs to be given. As my colleague Emma Harper's motion mentions, brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer. However, the national investment in brain tumour research still represents just 1 per cent of brain tumour funding since records began in 2002.

For too long, brain tumours have been low on the list of priorities. As a result, patients and families are let down. For change to happen, there needs to be a strategic plan with joined-up thinking across the pathways of discovery, translational and clinical research. Government departments must start working together.

It is crucial for scientists in Scotland to be able to access further funding, including National Institute for Health and Care Research funding, to do their vital work. We must ensure that adequate research is being done to make advancements in brain tumour treatments. More investment in the treatment of brain tumours is urgently needed so that treatments can be developed and accelerated and the capacity of our medical research can be expanded.

I will say a few words about the importance of the horizon Europe programme for brain tumour research and the wider research community. The UK Government recently published an independent review of the country's research and development landscape, which concluded that the horizon Europe association was essential. The review recommended that relationships with European Union partners be protected, maintained and expanded.

The free exchange of researchers, ideas and data with our closest research-intensive neighbours is vital for UK-wide research, development and innovation. It is vital that Scotland and the whole of the UK have full access to horizon Europe, which is the world's largest collaborative research programme. If we have that, we can take great steps towards finding a cure for brain tumours.

18:28

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** It is a privilege to respond to the debate and give my first parliamentary speech as Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. Joining the ministerial team is an honour, and I look forward to working with stakeholders from across the portfolio, including members.

I thank Emma Harper for bringing the motion to the chamber and I thank all the colleagues who have made such valuable contributions, highlighting the importance of brain tumour awareness month and sharing some personal stories.

I, too, welcome to the public gallery members of Brain Tumour Research and Alan Johnstone, whom Emma Harper mentioned. I give him my heartfelt thanks for the selfless work that he has done to raise funds and, importantly, awareness of brain tumours after the tragic loss of his wife, Annika.

I have brought a hat with me today. I promise that I will not wear it, but I hope that the Presiding Officer will indulge me with this prop. The hat is from Calum's Cabin, which is an inspirational charity on the Isle of Bute, in my constituency. The charity was set up by an inspirational family to support children who are undergoing cancer treatment and their families. That touches on some of the points that Paul Sweeney made in his speech.

Calum Speirs passed away from an inoperable brain tumour on 16 February 2007. His parents, Duncan and Caroline, and his twin sister Jenna started fundraising to fulfil Calum's dream to offer family holidays to children like him on his beloved Isle of Bute. Calum's Cabin now has holiday homes in three locations across Scotland, where families can go and spend quality family time together, making irreplaceable memories and recharging their batteries. There are also nine flats in Glasgow, where families who have to spend a long time away from home when a child is enduring longer-term treatment at Glasgow's children's hospitals can stay. The charity offers a home away from home for families who are faced with such uncertainty.

I compliment every member who contributed to the debate. Having the opportunity to talk about the importance of subjects such as brain tumour cancer is one of the privileges of being an elected MSP. David Torrance spoke about the need to take account of people's experiences. Sandesh Gulhane mentioned research and Heather's campaign. Paul Sweeney talked about the centre of excellence and research. Beatrice Wishart raised awareness through her powerful personal story. Jackie Dunbar spoke about the importance of early diagnosis, and Foysol Choudhury mentioned the importance of research.

As others have said, survival rates for some cancers have improved at a much slower rate than those for other cancers. For brain cancer, the difficult fact is that the five-year age-standardised survival rate cannot be robustly estimated because the patient cohort is simply too small. For other, more survivable cancers, the average five-year survival rate is 69 per cent.

We know that the earlier cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat. That is why we continue to invest in our detect cancer early programme, which takes a whole-systems approach to early detection that encompasses public awareness, primary care, screening, diagnostics and data. Since its launch, positive shifts have been noted but, as others have mentioned, the pandemic has impacted on its progress.

Diagnosing brain cancer can be challenging as the symptoms are wide ranging and they can often be vague, as Dr Gulhane mentioned. Work is under way to update our get checked early website with content on brain cancer in order to ensure that possible symptoms are highlighted and the public are reassured on next steps. In addition, in March, we launched a new public awareness campaign—"Be the Early Bird"—with the aim of reducing fear of cancer and empowering people with possible symptoms to act early.

We are also working to improve the pathways for patients once they have taken the all-important step of contacting their GP. In 2018, the detect cancer early programme funded a clinical refresh of eight pathways, including brain cancer, in the "Scottish Referral Guidelines for Suspected Cancer". The revised guidance that was published in January 2019 supports primary care clinicians in ensuring that people with suspected symptoms of cancer are put on the right pathway at the right time.

More recently, we have established Scotland's first rapid cancer diagnostic services within existing NHS infrastructure. The first centres, which are operational in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Dumfries and Galloway and NHS Fife, provide access to a new fast-track referral

pathway for patients with non-specific symptoms suspicious of cancer. Two further services in NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Borders will be fully operational by June 2023, supported by more than £600,000 of investment. My colleague Jackie Dunbar mentioned NHS Grampian, which has not submitted a proposal. However, it is working on a regional proposal, which we expect to see in the current financial year.

In collaboration with health professionals and patients, the Scottish cancer network is developing new national clinical management pathways that set out best practice for a cancer patient's care. Initially, three new CMPs have been developed and, given our focus on less survivable cancers, one of those is for neurological cancers, including brain cancer.

In addition to the work that is already under way, colleagues will be aware that we are developing a new, ambitious 10-year cancer strategy that is to be launched shortly. The new strategy will continue to focus on those cancer types that have the poorest survival rates. It will take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways from prevention and diagnosis through to treatment and post-treatment care. Its vision will be supported by a three-year action plan and it will include a commitment to clinically refresh the referral guidelines, including those for brain cancer, and explore the role of decision-making support tools in enabling early identification and appropriate onward referral.

**Paul Sweeney:** I welcome the minister to her new role in the Scottish Government. I would like to follow up on her point about investment, particularly in relation to the institute of neurological sciences in Glasgow, which is an ageing facility that has long needed replacement. Could there be an opportunity to build on the investment, particularly for brain tumour research activities, so that the institute can be built on as another UK centre of excellence in the field?

**Jenni Minto:** I thank Paul Sweeney for his kind words and his intervention. I would be happy to meet him after the debate to discuss the matter and see whether we can make any progress.

Work to develop a new earlier cancer diagnosis vision in Scotland that will outline the future of the detect cancer early programme is also nearing completion. That vision will form part of the new cancer strategy. Although it will focus on reducing later stage disease, it acknowledges that not all cancers—including brain cancer—have a formal staging system. Additional measures will be considered to monitor progress and improvement in those areas, including diagnoses via emergency presentations. We will continue to work with the less survivable cancers task force, of which the Brain Tumour Charity is a member, to develop

practical and impactful actions to support the increased detection of those cancers.

This April is also the first teenage and young adult cancer awareness month. We know that, from 2010 to 2019, just over a quarter of the children and young people who were diagnosed with cancer had a cancer of the brain and/or central nervous system. A cancer diagnosis is indescribably difficult for young people and their families to go through. We are committed to making sure that the necessary support for physical and mental health is available to all who need it, when they need it. That is why the managed service network for children and young people with cancer was established. The Scottish Government is committed to improving services nationally and to supporting a consistent approach to care and treatment across the country.

I reiterate to members and those who are watching the debate the Scottish Government's enduring commitment to diagnosing brain tumours earlier for children, young people and adults. I thank all those who give their energy tirelessly to raise awareness of brain tumours and do the work that we know must continue to be done to improve survival rates. People can find out more about the symptoms of brain cancer by visiting the NHS inform website. If you or anyone you know are worried about symptoms, please contact your local primary care service for help and advice. Together, we can close the deadly cancer gap and ensure that Scotland continues to lead progress for less survivable cancers.

*Meeting closed at 18:38.*

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