



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 6 September 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 6 September 2023

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:59]

Portfolio Question Time

Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time and the first portfolio is wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. I also remind members of the advice in relation to questions, which should take no more than 45 seconds, and responses, which should take no more than a minute. That will be rigorously enforced from here on in.

Fuel Insecurity Fund (Cunninghame South)

1. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how the fuel insecurity fund is supporting residents in the Cunninghame South constituency. (S6O-02456)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Each fuel insecurity fund partner is distinct in terms of delivery with regard to the use of funding, targeted support measures and approach, which is tailored to their local area. Cunninghame Housing Association has received £154,000 in the past year as part of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations' support, which is directed towards social housing tenants of registered social landlords. That has helped 1,500 tenants through fuel vouchers, support with energy debt and the provision of energy advice and low-energy products. To date, Advice Direct Scotland has provided more than £120,000 in funding to residents of the Cunninghame South constituency, at an average of £800 of support per household.

Ruth Maguire: Although the key energy policy levers remain with the United Kingdom Government, it is welcome that the Scottish National Party Scottish Government continues to support people who are facing unprecedented rises in the cost of energy.

Does the minister agree that the Tories at Westminster have so far failed to take the necessary steps to ensure that households never again experience an energy crisis such as the

present one? Will she join me in calling for the UK Government to put the energy and cost of living crisis front and centre of its work?

Gillian Martin: Of course, I agree with Ruth Maguire. We have consistently called on the UK Government to take action of the sort that she has mentioned. Although we are doing all that we can with our powers to support as many people as possible during the cost crisis, the biggest problem is the source of the problem. Only the UK Government has the fiscal and policy levers to truly address this unacceptable situation. Until it does so, we can step in to mitigate the situation for households only when there is a crisis.

Meaningful targeted support on energy bills for those who need it most must be prioritised, which is why we continue to call for the introduction of a social tariff for the most vulnerable in our society. I had a meeting with the UK minister, Amanda Solloway, on that very issue this week. The UK Government also needs to make the necessary energy market reforms, to permanently break the link between the price of electricity and the cost of gas and thereby ensure that the people of such a renewable energy-rich nation as Scotland never have to endure such a situation again.

Feed-in Tariffs Scheme

2. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what further discussions it plans to have with the United Kingdom Government regarding lifting the 100kW deployment cap on its feed-in tariffs scheme for renewable energy generation from community and farm-owned micro hydro schemes in Scotland. (S6O-02457)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): As I have said, the Scottish Government continues to meet the UK Government regularly to discuss a range of issues to do with the energy market and tariffs, in particular, including the provision of support schemes for renewable energy generation projects across the commercial and community sectors.

Scottish Government support remains available through our community and renewable energy scheme—CARES—to help communities to assess their priorities for net zero, including potential opportunities for energy generation.

Ariane Burgess: Constituents have shared their frustration at being able to produce 40 per cent more electricity than the current cap but being unable to export it, as doing so would result in them losing all their feed-in tariffs.

In the face of the climate and energy crisis, does the minister agree that the UK Government should enable Scotland to do all that it can to harness its

potential for renewable energy, especially from community and farm micro hydro schemes?

Gillian Martin: I absolutely do. I think that the UK Government is missing a trick because, cumulatively, such community energy schemes could be generating a huge amount of renewable electricity. Scotland's and the UK's net zero ambitions depend heavily on an energy system that supplies affordable, resilient and clean energy. Expanding community and locally owned renewable energy projects will be key to realising a fair and just transition, which is why we continue to press the UK Government to implement reforms to the energy markets that better support community and local projects.

We continue to take our own actions through schemes such as CARES, which support our progress towards our ambition of 2GW of community and locally owned energy by 2030. The member will be pleased to hear that we are almost halfway towards achieving that target.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Public bodies could play a much bigger role in supporting community schemes by using power purchase agreements in the national framework agreement for best supply of electricity, but, in written answers to me, the cabinet secretary has confirmed that no such agreements are in place. What is the Scottish Government doing to support public bodies and community groups that wish to create micro hydro or other renewable schemes and generate income from them?

Gillian Martin: I refer Ms Boyack to my earlier answer about CARES, which is doing exactly that. To date, CARES has helped more than 900 organisations and has provided more than £60 million in funding to communities, and it has supported progress towards our ambition of 2GW, as I said.

At the end of last year, there was an estimated 908MW of community and locally owned renewable energy capacity, estimated to produce nearly 2,000 gigawatt hours of renewable energy annually. We want to see that go up, so I would recommend that the bodies that Sarah Boyack has been speaking to get involved with CARES. If there is anything further that we can be doing, she should of course write to me to make suggestions. I am always willing to listen.

Trade Unions (Scottish Government Policy Development)

3. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with trade unions to ensure that it includes workers' voices in its policy development. (S60-02458)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

Scottish Government ministers meet the Scottish Trades Union Congress regularly, reflecting the important role that unions play as key social partners in sustaining effective democracy in society and contributing to economic competitiveness and social justice. Our strategic relationship with the STUC is underpinned by a memorandum of understanding that includes commitments to include the STUC in relevant policy development and for the First Minister to meet the STUC biannually to discuss current issues.

The STUC and affiliate trade unions have been engaged in a number of recent policy developments, including our national strategy for economic transformation, advancing fair work in adult social care, our retail strategy and our refreshed fair work action plan.

Mark Griffin: Last week, in its response in support of my bill for an employment injuries advisory council, the Fair Work Convention said that it was "pleased to see" the principle of "effective voice" underpinning the bill, which would put the voices

"of trade unions at the heart of the Council"

and the new benefit.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that workers know their workplaces best? They know the illnesses and diseases that they face at work, so will the Government listen to the Fair Work Convention, which it established, and support the bill, so that we can secure workers' voices in the new benefit?

Neil Gray: We will respond to Mark Griffin's proposals in due course. In principle, we continue to work with not just the STUC but the Fair Work Convention to ensure that, as Mark Griffin points out, we have effective worker voice across all elements of society and advance that as best as possible. That is a job that I am taking forward with ministerial colleagues across Government.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): The Scottish Government's tourism and hospitality industry leadership group has a trade union representative as a full member, which has been seen by all parties as a positive development that ensures a focus on fair work in the sector. Has the Scottish Government looked at whether there is scope for trade union representation on other industry leadership groups?

Neil Gray: Yes. Trade unions are working with the Scottish Government alongside the Fair Work Convention, which is tasked with promoting fairer workplaces and encouraging employers to engage with the fair work agenda. Unite's membership of

the tourism and hospitality ILG is important in ensuring effective voice in strategic-level discussions with industry. Trade unions are an essential and integral partner in supporting our industries to adapt and innovate for future challenges and opportunities, and they engage across a range of industry sectors. The retail ILG has trade union representatives, such as the GMB and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, as full members of that group, which is promoting all aspects of fair work across the retail industry, and Unite is a full member of the construction leadership forum. Trade unions are also engaged in the construction accord and will continue to play an important role.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The Labour Party was a movement grown out of trade unions, with the purpose of supporting workers' rights. However, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party has moved so far to the right that it is content to leave Scottish workers' rights in the hands of a right-wing, draconian Westminster Government.

Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the Scottish Government's continued attempts to guarantee, protect and strengthen workers' rights in Scotland, and will he join me in calling for Scottish Labour politicians who are serious about tackling employment issues to commit to devolving employment law to Holyrood immediately?

Neil Gray: Yes. The discomfort from Labour members on the different tracks that have been taken by Scottish Labour and its Westminster leaders is quite something to behold, and that continues.

We are using the devolved levers that we have to promote fairer work across Scotland. Our commitment is demonstrated through our fair work first approach in procurement and public sector grants and our broader support for fair work practices.

We are clear in our position on the Trade Union Act 2016 and subsequent anti-trade union Westminster legislation: we vehemently oppose those measures. Most recently, we opposed the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023, which we find abhorrent, and we will continue to encourage the United Kingdom Government to guarantee, protect and strengthen workers' rights. Unfortunately, our efforts in that regard have yielded little result.

If Labour in Scotland is serious about tackling employment issues, it should join us in calling for the devolution of employment law, short of independence, immediately.

Wellbeing Economy (Investment)

4. **Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government how the

investment announced in the 2023-24 programme for government will contribute towards a move to a wellbeing economy in the Central Scotland region. (S6O-02459)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

The actions that are set out in the programme for government will drive our transition to a fair, green and growing wellbeing economy, providing opportunities for people to realise their full potential and businesses to thrive. They will ensure that prosperity and investment are shared across our communities and regions. That includes investing £2.2 billion in 2023-24 to address the impacts of climate change and deliver a just transition to net zero, a pay uplift for care workers and childcare workers to £12 an hour and a £15 million package to support enterprise and entrepreneurship, which will create new opportunities to start, scale and sustain businesses in Scotland.

Gillian Mackay: Many projects across my Central Scotland region, such as those delivered through the Falkirk Foundation and the Motherwell Football Club Community Trust, contribute greatly to the wellbeing of their communities, including by providing lunches to children, football camps, employability schemes and mental health support. How can the Scottish Government ensure that practical as well as financial support is provided to projects that deliver positive outcomes such as those?

Neil Gray: Scottish football has a strong track record of delivering on national and local outcomes through projects and programmes such as CashBack for Communities, the Scottish Association on Mental Health changing rooms extra time mental wellbeing programme and out-of-school childcare at Ayr United Football Club. I must also welcome the work of the incredible Diamonds in the Community in Airdrie, in my constituency.

The breadth and diversity of the communities that our football clubs service is considerable. Many of those communities are in areas of significant deprivation, and we continue to work with the Scottish Football Association to improve the wellbeing of communities across Scotland.

We have invested £36 million over two years in our communities mental health and wellbeing fund, with approximately 3,300 grants going to local projects across Scotland. In 2022-23, 15 local community football mental health and wellbeing projects received more than £150,000, including £10,000 to the Falkirk Foundation and just over £30,000 to the Motherwell Football Club Community Trust. A further £15 million is committed in 2023-24, and we are providing local authorities with £15 million a year for community-

based mental health support for children and young people.

Tourism Sector (Support)

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to support the tourism sector. (S6O-02460)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government recognises how vital tourism is to our economy, and, working with VisitScotland, we actively promote Scotland as a tourist destination through targeted campaigns to domestic and international markets. Recent events that have helped to promote Scotland to international audiences, such as the Union Cycliste Internationale cycling world championships, have been very successful in attracting not just competitors but visitors from around the globe.

A key component of our national strategy for economic transformation is our tourism policy, "Scotland Outlook 2030: Responsible tourism for a sustainable future". Supporting the sector will help us to achieve the responsible and sustainable goals for Scotland to be a world leader in 21st century tourism.

Jackie Baillie: I recently met a number of tourism businesses that operate in the national parks, and they told me that the current situation is unsustainable and heading towards crisis. Hospitality businesses in England and Wales can receive up to 75 per cent non-domestic rates relief. The Scottish Government, which we know has received funding based on that policy, has chosen not to pass any relief on to the struggling Scottish sector. Will the minister agree to meet the national park destination management group to hear its concerns first hand? Why, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, does he not think that that relief is justified?

Richard Lochhead: I would be delighted to meet the group that Jackie Baillie has mentioned, as I am keen to hear its views. To put things into perspective, I have to say that—notwithstanding the big pressures that are faced by the businesses that she mentioned—the results from the survey of the sector, which was carried out in August 2023, said that the three biggest concerns for businesses in the sector were energy prices, inflation and interest rates, in that order. She will be aware that the Government and the Parliament do not have responsibility for those issues; they are United Kingdom Government issues.

The new deal for business and the working groups within that have been looking at some of the issues that Jackie Baillie outlined in relation to

rates and so on, and the report on that will be published shortly. We are keen to help the hospitality sector in Scotland as much as we can, but we also need help from the UK Government.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Right now, the tourism sector is united in raising concerns about the licensing of short-term lets regulations that are due to come in on 1 October, which will affect not only self-catering units but bed and breakfasts, guest houses, home shares and home swaps. Given those concerns and the unintended consequences of the regulations that are coming in, if the Scottish Government really is listening to business, it should surely now pause the introduction of the regulations and give time for a proper and thorough review of what is going wrong as a result of the policy.

Richard Lochhead: I listened very closely to the Minister for Housing's statement on that subject during topical question time yesterday. The minister gave an up-to-date report on where things are and said that he is listening closely to stakeholders.

I want to put on record the valuable role that self-catering accommodation, bed and breakfasts and similar short-term let accommodation play in the Scottish economy and the tourism sector. However, the Government—indeed, the policy had support from members across the chamber and from all parties—is trying to balance some important factors. We have to take into account consistency of standards across the sector and the impact on neighbourhoods and communities, which is why all parties at Westminster—indeed, in the past, all parties in this chamber—and governments around the world are looking at regulating short-term lets right now. Even San Francisco, which hosts the global headquarters of Airbnb, has had to introduce stringent regulation of short-term lets. It is quite right that we look at that.

There were three consultations, and businesses have until 1 October to apply.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Can the minister provide an update on the steps that are being taken within the powers currently available to the Scottish Government to support tourism businesses that have reported staff shortages due to the loss of freedom of movement?

Richard Lochhead: As well as the other issues that have an impact on tourism and hospitality in Scotland, the fourth issue that is often mentioned is the impact that Brexit has had through a shortage of labour and skills—particularly in rural Scotland, the west of Scotland and the islands. That is a big issue.

This week, I met with the industry-led tourism and hospitality skills group to see what more the

Scottish Government can do not only to put pressure on the UK Government to do the right thing on immigration and rural visas but to make tourism and hospitality an attractive career option for the young people of Scotland.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The practical implications of short-term lets licensing applications are posing a threat to the emergence and growth of tourism in Scotland. A combination of a shortage of qualified trades and long travel times to islands is making it very difficult for some accommodation providers to complete necessary work and get certification for their applications, which is putting businesses at risk. I raised that with the Minister for Housing and the council, who are both aware of the issues but are unable to identify a solution. How is the Scottish Government working with local authorities to ensure that local needs are addressed for the licensing requirements?

Richard Lochhead: I will certainly pass on the member's comments to the housing minister. One issue that is often raised with me by tourism businesses on the islands and across Scotland is that they sometimes cannot recruit staff because there is nowhere for them to live, and there is nowhere for them to live because of second homes and houses and properties bought for tourism purposes—short-term lets—and for other purposes.

That is one of the reasons why we are looking at those issues, and I say to Beatrice Wishart that the key worker housing policy that we are developing at the moment and the forthcoming rural plan will say a lot more about that. The First Minister has already announced substantial resources for a key worker housing plan. I understand that that is a big issue in Shetland—I remember that from my own visit there. We are very serious about addressing those issues.

Clyde Mission Regeneration Programme

6. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Clyde mission regeneration programme. (S6O-02461)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): On 28 August, the First Minister confirmed that leadership of the Clyde mission will move from the Scottish Government to local authorities in the Glasgow city region and Argyll and Bute. The Government is committed to empowering our regions to drive economic development that is focused as much on wellbeing as it is on growing our economy.

The Scottish Government remains a partner in the Clyde mission, investing £1.5 million in a new

master plan. Alongside previous investment of £13.6 million and a commitment of £25 million to new heat decarbonisation projects, total Scottish Government investment will top £40 million.

Kaukab Stewart: Ensuring that Glasgow's communities are better connected is a perennial discussion that I have with my stakeholders in the constituency. The pedestrian bridge that will connect Partick, which is in my constituency, and Govan across the river will go a long way towards achieving connection between communities that are cut off from each other.

What further projects does the Government foresee to better connect communities and improve the lives of those who live in them?

Neil Gray: I agree that connectivity between communities is crucial and that the new bridge connecting Govan and Partick is a very exciting project. There are other similar projects in Glasgow, such as the recently opened Sighthill pedestrian bridge. That was funded by the Glasgow city region deal, which the Scottish Government supported, and has huge potential to improve the connections between communities for work and leisure. I am also aware of the £2.3 million of Scottish Government investment into the regeneration of the Govan graving docks, which will be used to deliver new greenspace and address existing barriers to access to the riverfront for communities.

Community Energy Schemes (National Grid Access)

7. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding ensuring access to the national grid for community energy schemes in Scotland. (S6O-02462)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government has long understood the value of community energy in engaging Scotland's communities in the journey towards net zero and in delivering the economic and social benefits to local areas that are at the heart of our just transition. We regularly discuss the availability of grid connections with the UK Government, the electricity system operator, relevant network companies and Ofgem, making clear that the network must support the connection and delivery of clean power to communities, homes and businesses across Scotland.

Emma Harper: I was pleased that the minister accepted my invitation to visit the Penpont community micro-hydro scheme in Dumfries and Galloway during recess. It is clear that such schemes are crucial in supporting our renewable energy output and providing green power at a

local level. They are also crucial in our fight against the climate emergency. However, the UK Government seems unwilling to adopt those schemes to the national grid. Will the minister confirm that an independent Scotland will have a focus on those schemes, providing low-cost power through a national grid of our own?

Gillian Martin: I first thank Emma Harper for the invitation to visit Penpont community energy scheme. I enjoyed my visit very much.

The Scottish Government has been clear that increased renewables—which are lower cost than gas-fired power or nuclear—in conjunction with long duration storage technologies will be key to meeting our net zero ambitions. Although the rules and regulations relating to electricity networks are reserved to the UK Government, an independent Scotland would seek to maximise our vast renewables potential. That would not only support energy self-reliance and ensure that we generated enough green electricity to power Scotland, but also mean exporting increasing amounts of low-carbon energy to our neighbours and supplying new markets, such as the emerging hydrogen economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Brian Whittle.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Does the minister recognise the opportunities to develop off-grid local energy systems such as through using wind and solar power to develop green hydrogen, which in turn could power big business and transport? What support is the Government giving to those opportunities, and how will the minister promote them?

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

Gillian Martin: I point to our hydrogen strategy and to some of the visits that I made over the course of the summer. We are putting a lot of money into innovation, particularly around small electrolyzers. I met a company in the south of Scotland that is looking to diversify from large electrolyzers to small units that would allow farms, for example, to generate their own hydrogen. If Brian Whittle wants to see me afterwards, I could point him to that company and he could maybe make a visit of his own.

Employment Law Devolution (Impact on Labour Market Strategy)

8. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact that any future devolution of employment law to the Scottish Parliament would have on its long-term labour market strategy. (S6O-02463)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

Securing the full range of powers in relation to employment law will enable the Scottish Parliament to implement policies that will best meet Scotland's distinct needs. In "Building a New Scotland: A stronger economy with independence", we outlined plans to offer comprehensive employment rights including flexible working, parental leave and unfair dismissal claims on day 1 of employment. Those powers would create fairer workplaces, enhance workers' rights in Scotland and help to shift the curve on poverty and deliver on our shared ambition for a wellbeing economy that is fair, green and growing, with a just transition to net zero.

Annabelle Ewing: Is it not the case that, just like the Scottish National Party Scottish Government, the Scottish Trades Union Congress has been campaigning for the devolution of employment law precisely to ensure that workers are better protected? Would that not be the better path?

Neil Gray: Absolutely. The STUC and the Scottish Government have long shared the view that employment powers should be devolved to Holyrood. Both parties continue to press the United Kingdom Government for the full devolution of employment powers in order to protect and enhance workers' rights. I hope that they will bring the Labour Party in Scotland with them on that journey, as it has consistently blocked the passage of employment law being devolved to the Parliament.

In "Building a New Scotland", we set out the protection that Scotland could introduce if it had full employment law powers. For example, we propose repealing unfair labour laws such as the UK's Trade Union Act 2016, legislating to ban fire and rehire and properly resourcing the enforcement of a Scottish national minimum wage. Policy coherence with the full suite of powers of independence, including powers over migration, would ensure that we had a migration strategy and a labour policy that were joined up and that addressed the needs of Scotland's economy.

Finance and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is finance and parliamentary business. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. I also remind members of the time requirements. Questions should take up to 45 seconds and responses should take no more than a minute. That will again be rigorously enforced. On that basis, I call Daniel Johnson to ask question 1.

Public Sector Headcount

1. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** Challenge accepted.

To ask the Scottish Government what the change in public sector full-time equivalent headcount has been in the last 12 months across all devolved areas. (S6O-02464)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Full-time equivalent employment in Scotland's devolved public sector increased by 2,910 over the 12 months to March 2023. That represents a 0.6 per cent increase to a total full-time equivalent figure of 463,200. Local government showed the largest increase in employment—that figure increased by 1,620 over the period. It is for public bodies, in dialogue with their respective trade unions, to determine the target operating model for their workforces, while ensuring that plans are affordable and reflect our stated commitment to no compulsory redundancies.

Daniel Johnson: Indeed—that is their priority. However, between 2021 and 2022, civil servant headcount increased by 4,500—almost twice as much as the increase in the national health service headcount, which was less than 2,500. That was at a time when the number of police, fire and further education workers flatlined or declined. What does it tell us about the Government's priorities when it prioritises increases in bureaucracy and the number of spin doctors, rather than front-line doctors and nurses?

Shona Robison: I do not accept that, and it does a great disservice to the hard-working civil service. I am sure that the civil service unions will be paying attention to what Daniel Johnson said. What he has not taken into account is the impact of events such as the European Union exit and the Covid-19 pandemic, which we had to ensure that the civil service was able to respond to.

However, going forward, the workforce has to be affordable. In partnership with the trade unions, we have agreed that work will be taken forward to make sure that the operating model for the civil service delivers efficiently and can meet the needs of the organisation in a sustainable and affordable way. As I said, we will take forward that work in partnership with our trade union colleagues.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I am sure that the Deputy First Minister agrees that it is critical to deploy resources on the front line of service delivery and in support of the Government's agenda of tackling poverty, rather than on support activities. What has been the change in core Scottish Government headcount and costs over the past three years? What work is being done to minimise those costs to ensure that

maximum resources are applied to delivering the Government's agenda on the front line?

Shona Robison: I will not repeat the figures that I have given, but I can write to Ivan McKee with more detail. In 2022-23, the size of the core Scottish Government decreased as enhanced recruitment controls were applied to reflect the changing economic and financial context. Effective prioritisation meant that the Government was still able to deliver on its key priorities, including our Ukraine response, our on-going net zero and new ScotWind commitments and addressing the cost of living crisis through our social security policies. The Scottish Government continually monitors the cost of its operations to ensure that resources are aligned to our programme for government commitments. As I said, I am happy to write to Ivan McKee with detailed figures.

Public Sector Pay Settlements (Impact on Services)

2. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact recent public sector pay settlements are having on the provision of services. (S6O-02465)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The Government values the vital role of the public sector and the people who deliver its services. We support fair work principles and partnership approaches with trade unions through collective bargaining arrangements. However, our budget has been hit by inflation and, in 2022-23, we directed about £900 million to fund higher pay awards. Despite that pressure and the lack of consequential from the United Kingdom Government, agreed pay settlements for national health service staff, teachers, firefighters and others provide evidence of the success of our approach of providing fair settlements to maintain high-quality public services and avoid costly industrial action.

Christine Grahame: I put it on record that I fully support the Scottish Government in helping folk to cope with the UK cost of living crisis by negotiating those settlements within its fixed budget. However, the Scottish Government has no control over inflation, which is running at 8 per cent. Is it not crystal clear that the constraints of devolution are there for all to see—causing us to eat into other budgets to the amount that the cabinet secretary just disclosed—and that we need to be independent of this failing UK sooner rather than later?

Shona Robison: I agree completely with Christine Grahame's last point, but, in the meantime, the Treasury could support the cost of pay deals but refuses to do so. The Tory UK

Government seems to have a high threshold for industrial action. That is not something that the Scottish Government supports. We believe in going forward in partnership, and we absolutely recognise the cost of industrial action to public services and the people who rely on them.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The chief executive of Scottish Water has been awarded a pay rise that unions have highlighted as being £50,000 above the Scottish Government's current policy on public sector pay, while lower-paid staff are in dispute over their wages. Will the cabinet secretary listen to unions that are calling for a review of public sector pay policy, including excessive executive pay at the top?

Shona Robison: Pay rises are a matter for public bodies, but we would expect them to abide by public sector pay policy, and it is important that those in leadership positions in public bodies lead by example. We reinforce that through our sponsorship teams, and we will continue to do that. I should say that Scottish Water—in terms of its performance, operation and delivery, and as a financial model—is doing a lot of good work. Nevertheless, in times such as these, the need for constraint should be recognised by everyone, particularly those in leadership positions.

Council Tax (Community Engagement)

3. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with communities in the North East Scotland region on any increases to and reform of council tax. (S6O-02466)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): In partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we are seeking views on the proposals to increase the charges in council tax property bands E to H. The fairer council tax consultation closes on 20 September and will take into account the views of all respondents and stakeholders, including those from the north-east.

Maggie Chapman: I have been contacted by several constituents who are pensioners and are concerned about the possible changes to council tax bands E and above. Faced with the cost of living crisis and a fixed income, they are already not looking forward to winter. Will the minister say more about the options for change and what the timescale will be, and say what more can be done, other than through the council tax reduction scheme, to tackle pensioner poverty? Further, will he provide a timeline for the much-needed and long-awaited comprehensive overhaul of council tax?

Joe FitzPatrick: The consultation is seeking views on whether people who are in properties

that are in the highest bands should make a greater contribution only when they can afford to do so. The council tax reduction scheme ensures that nobody has to pay a council tax bill that they cannot be expected to afford, regardless of their property band, so, in addition, the consultation seeks views on whether the reduction scheme should be expanded to protect people on lower incomes from any increases.

Scottish councils have been treated fairly throughout UK-imposed austerity, but we recognise the challenging environment that they face. That is why we are continuing to have, and are committed to, a new deal with local government to ensure the sustainability of local services.

Maggie Chapman will be aware that the working group on local government funding is working in collaboration with COSLA and other partners. They will consider what other options might be brought forward. The proposal that COSLA and the Scottish Government are consulting on could result in significant additional funding—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I will take a supplementary from Michael Marra.

Joe FitzPatrick: —to local services in the short term.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister should know that up to 80,000 low-income households could face rises of up to 22 per cent as a result of the proposals that he has made. In the worst cost of living crisis in a generation, why does the Government think that ordinary Scots should foot the bill for its failure to fund local services?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is impossible and impractical to suggest that we should continue investing in local services but not look at how we will face the cost of living crisis and cost of energy crisis. Mr Marra talks about 80,000 households paying 22 per cent more. In the proposal that is being consulted on, 22 per cent relates to band H properties. In Dundee, just over 30 properties are in that band.

It is really important that we look at the matter in the round. If Mr Marra has other suggestions on how we can raise funds for local services across the piece, I ask him to please make them. However, he cannot say, "No council tax rises, no income tax rises, no VAT." I do not know, but is that a song, perhaps?

Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund

4. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I think that it is a song, minister.

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the announcement by the local government

empowerment minister in July, whether it will provide an update on what discussions he has had regarding the roll-out of the islands cost crisis emergency fund. (S6O-02467)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): I was delighted to announce the launch of the £1 million islands cost crisis emergency fund on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands during my visit to Shetland this summer. Shetland Islands Council immediately welcomed the announcement and commended the greater flexibility that it provided to support business as well as communities. It was also welcomed in other island communities, including Alasdair Allan's and the Deputy Presiding Officer's.

The current cost of living crisis and its effect on our island communities continues to be a key priority for the Scottish Government and it will be discussed in further detail at the upcoming islands strategic group in October.

Alasdair Allan: That welcome additional support for island communities in the cost of living crisis recognises the higher costs, including energy bills, that islanders incur. What is the minister's view on the United Kingdom Government's decision to scrap the energy bill support scheme from last winter, which means that many of my constituents' bills will be even higher than they were?

Joe FitzPatrick: The October energy price cap, coupled with the UK Government's scrapping of the energy bill support scheme, will mean that average households will pay more this winter. That will negatively impact people and businesses on Scotland's islands, who already face far higher costs than the average household. That is why the UK Government should not have ended the energy bill support scheme.

Despite Scottish ministers' repeated calls for the chancellor to extend the scheme, he has failed to do so, which leaves our island communities exposed to higher energy bills. I take the opportunity once again to call on the UK Government to provide the support that people and businesses across all Scotland will need this winter.

Women with a History of Offending and Substance Abuse (Budget Allocation)

5. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated from its 2023-24 budget to community justice services for the purpose of supporting women with a history of offending and substance abuse. (S6O-02468)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is investing around £134 million in community justice services in 2023-24. That is made up of around £123 million to local authorities with the remainder being direct funding for third sector services. Local authorities have the autonomy to direct funding according to local needs and that might include supporting services for women with a history of offending and substance abuse.

Monica Lennon: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a member of Unite the union.

Turning Point Scotland's 218 service in Glasgow is a lifeline service for women, but, today, Unite the union has called for an urgent review of an £850,000 budget cut by the Government and Glasgow City Council that could force the centre to close and make 30 workers redundant. Will the cabinet secretary agree to review the community justice services budget and this funding crisis with a view to saving the service, saving lives and saving jobs, and to keep the Parliament updated?

Shona Robison: We have not reduced the overall funding that is available for community justice services across Scotland, nor have we asked local authorities to reduce any specific funding within that. Decisions about the commissioning of individual community justice services are for local authorities. Community justice funding is primarily based on a local model whereby we provide the funding to local authorities, which then commission the services according to local needs.

If services are reviewed and changed, that is a matter for the local authority. Even when aspects of that funding are targeted at more specific needs, as is the case with the funding that is currently provided to the 218 service, the commissioning and management of those services, including any retendering, are matters entirely for the local authority. We do not get involved in those decisions.

I am sure that Glasgow City Council will be able to discuss with the member the detail and the reasons for that change following the review of that service, if she wants to take up that opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has not been lodged.

Local Services (Budget Allocation)

7. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated to local authorities from its 2023-24 budget to prevent the closure of local services in light of rising energy

and running costs, including to prevent the closure of swimming pools. (S6O-02470)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Despite the most challenging budget settlement since devolution, the local government settlement increased by £793 million to nearly £13.5 billion in 2023-24. The vast majority of that funding is provided as a block grant, and it is for locally elected representatives to make decisions on how best to allocate those resources across their communities.

The fiscal environment for councils is unquestionably challenging, as it is for the whole of the public sector. That is why we are committed to a new deal with local government in order to ensure the sustainability of local services.

Fulton MacGregor: This Tory-inflicted cost of living crisis is affecting not only individuals but community hubs, assets and sports centres, including swimming pools. As we all know, swimming pools are vital in teaching people the life skill of swimming, as well as being invaluable community resources.

I recognise that the Scottish Government is operating with one hand tied behind its back, but what other steps are being taken to work with local authorities to ensure that swimming pools remain at the centre of our communities?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important that we do not overlook the fact that councils are democratically elected to make decisions on the priorities in their local communities. On the specific issue of swimming pools, the Scottish Government will continue to work with sportscotland, our national agency for sport, on the Scottish swimming facilities project to accurately understand the provision of current facilities and to predict the landscape in the short, medium and long term to ensure the sustainability of those important facilities.

We all know the benefits of physical activity in general, but swimming, in particular, is a life-saving skill.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Consequentials were added to the Scottish block grant after the United Kingdom Government announced the £63 million swimming pool support fund. How much of those consequentials was passed on to local authorities, and what additional funding has been provided to support swimming pools in Scotland?

Joe FitzPatrick: I confirm that all the consequentials that have come to the Scottish Government have been allocated. The Scottish Government has worked hard to ensure that local government gets a fair settlement. It is ironic that

the member comes to the chamber on the day that another English council—in Birmingham—goes bust—

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is a Labour council.

Joe FitzPatrick: It is one Labour council and, to be fair to the Labour Party, that council joins several Conservative councils across England.

This morning, on “Good Morning Scotland”, Jonathan Carr-West, the chief executive of the UK-based Local Government Information Unit, was asked whether that could happen in Scotland. He said:

“Scottish councils haven’t seen the same sustained austerity that English councils have seen over the last 13 years. We have seen a squeeze on local government funding in Scotland over the past couple of years, but we are starting from a ... safer place.”

We want to enter into a fair agreement with local government, working in partnership, to ensure that we can deliver better services for the whole of Scotland. We will do that across the board. The Tories need to get on board—if they want us to spend the money, they need to tell us where it is going—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Sue Webber.

Council Tax Bills

8. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an estimate of the number of households whose council tax bills have risen this year. (S6O-02471)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Council tax is a local tax that is set and administered by individual local authorities. Each council has the capacity to set the council tax rate that is appropriate for the local authority area. Although council tax was increased in each council area, that was, in each case, below the rate of inflation at that time, according to the consumer prices index.

We provide a generous package of discounts, reductions and exemptions, including the council tax reduction scheme, which is based on the ability to pay and benefits more than 450,000 households, with more than 380,000 households paying no council tax as at March 2023.

Sue Webber: Pensioners now disproportionately pay the highest rates of council tax, and nearly one in 10 people now pay the highest rates of income tax.

I will again put the question that Michael Marra asked as the minister did not quite answer it constructively. The damaging 22.5 per cent rise in

council tax is nothing more than a raid on pension incomes. Will the Scottish National Party reconsider that increase as it is threatening to push thousands of people out of homes in which they have lived for decades just to make up for its gutting of local government funding over the years?

Joe FitzPatrick: I will go back to what Jonathan Carr-West said on “Good Morning Scotland” this morning:

“I don’t want to minimise for Scottish councils”

or for

“many of our members in Scotland who are feeling the pinch a bit now and are having to make tougher decisions than hitherto, but they are starting in a much more comfortable place than English local authorities that have had more than a decade of really savage funding cuts.”

The member has a brass neck.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementaries, the first of which is from Kenny Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the minister advise how average council tax in Scotland compares with that in England under the Tories and with that in Wales under Labour?

Joe FitzPatrick: Council tax is considerably lower in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* Every Scottish household benefits from cheaper council tax, and the average council tax bill in Scotland is £604 less than the average bill in England in 2023-24. *[Interruption.]* The average—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask that you take your seat for a second.

Members, I know that there is a lot of interest in this issue, but it will help the proceedings if we can hear both the questions and the answers and if we do not have those on the front benches shouting at each other.

I ask the minister to resume.

Joe FitzPatrick: Every Scottish household benefits from cheaper council tax, and the average council tax bill in Scotland is £604 less than the average bill in England in 2023-24. The average band D charge in Scotland is £648 less than that in England and £463 less than that in Wales.

Research that the TaxPayers’ Alliance published last month found that, as a proportion of average income, Scotland has the lowest council tax bills in the UK.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The SNP position on council tax has changed significantly over the past 16 years. It has moved from abolishing it to freezing it and now to making the

biggest-ever hikes to it. I have sat through endless cross-party talking shops in this Parliament on reform of the council tax, but absolutely nothing has been done about it. When will the SNP deliver its promise from 16 years ago to abolish the unfair council tax?

Joe FitzPatrick: The member will be aware that the joint working group, which involves the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, is looking at options for local government finance. However, an option is being considered right now that will bring extra money into local government and make the regressive council tax fairer. I hope that the member and his party will support that extra funding for local government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on finance and parliamentary business. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow a changeover of those on the front benches.

Equality within the 2023-24 Programme for Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10343, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on equality within the 2023-24 programme for government. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion, for up to 13 minutes, please.

14:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm is one of the three critical missions for this Government, alongside our focus on growing the economy and strengthening public services. Those interconnected missions are front and centre of this year's programme for government, which is unapologetically anti-poverty and focused on delivering high-quality public services. It shows that we can alleviate inequality and poverty by ensuring that we have a fair, green and growing wellbeing economy that provides job opportunities and capitalises on a just transition.

This Government will continue to use our fixed budget to reduce poverty, improve opportunities and reduce health inequalities, protecting people as far as is possible from the harm inflicted by the United Kingdom Government's austerity-driven policies and the on-going cost of the union crisis. However, only with the full economic powers of an independent nation can we truly eradicate inequality and poverty here, in Scotland.

Delivering fair work and fair pay for all is critical to our missions and a top priority for the Scottish Government. The national health service is the largest employer in Scotland and, through our agenda for change pay offer, we have ensured that NHS employees in the lowest bands have the biggest increases in pay. Building on that, we are committing to providing the necessary funding in the next budget to increase the pay of adult social care workers in the private, third and independent sectors in a direct care role and of those working to deliver funded early learning and childcare to at least £12 per hour—an increase that could be worth up to £2,000 per year for those on full-time contracts. There are more than 200,000 registered workers in the social care sector, and four out of five of them are women. We know that women's poverty and child poverty are inextricably linked, so not only will this policy help to recruit and retain our workforce in social care and early learning and

childcare; it will also be a key step in tackling poverty among women and children.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Is it still the case that the Scottish Government will stand by the First Minister's commitment in March for a new national funding framework for hospices in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am sure that that is an aspect that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care can deal with in his closing speech. I recognise that many hospices, and, indeed, many charities in the third sector, are facing challenges, and we are very keen to support them where we can but within the limited budget that we have.

This Government is committed to tackling the inequality that we have in our community. I only wish that the UK Government had showed even one quarter of our ambition. The UK Conservative Government must face up to the damage and hardship that it has caused by having well over a decade of austerity and welfare cuts. That damage and that hardship have been exacerbated by a hard Brexit and shocking mismanagement of the economy that have led to soaring inflation, spiralling energy bills and the worst cost of living crisis in a generation.

This Government is doing all that it can in the face of that to make a difference. Despite the UK Government's policies pushing people into poverty, we know that our action is still making a difference. Modelling estimates that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year as a result of this Government's policies, with our poverty level 9 percentage points lower than it would have been otherwise. That includes an estimated 50,000 children who have been lifted out of relative poverty by the Scottish child payment.

That is a major achievement, but the achievement would be all the greater were we not being held back by UK Government policies that are pushing people into poverty at the same time. UK Government welfare policies, including the two-child limit and the benefit cap, inflict hardship on families on the lowest incomes. The two-child limit alone is affecting 80,000 children in Scotland, and it has removed £341 million from Scottish families since 2017. It is a disastrous policy for people right across this country at their time of greatest need.

If the United Kingdom Government were to reverse key welfare reforms that were introduced in 2015, that would help to lift 70,000 people out of poverty this year, including 30,000 children, and would put an estimated £780 million back in the pockets of the lowest-income households. The Conservatives in Westminster must no longer sit

by and watch people suffer—although they may feel that they can, because Labour is promising more of the same. That is why the powers over social security and employment, to name but two, are needed in the hands of this Parliament.

If the UK Government really wanted to do something to alleviate inequality, it could. That is why the First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday, calling for the UK Government to legislate to put in place an essentials guarantee to ensure that social security benefits adequately cover the cost of essentials, including food, transport and energy, and to ensure that deductions such as debt repayments to Government and sanctions or deductions resulting from the benefit cap can never pull support below that level. We know that the Welsh Government also supports that approach. I will follow up with further correspondence to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the coming days.

Over the past five financial years, we have invested £711 million through activities such as discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund to mitigate the austerity of UK Government policies, including the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and local housing allowance. That money could have been spent on services such as health, education and transport or on further ambitious anti-poverty measures. It could have paid for around 2,000 band 5 nurses each year. That is the price of staying in the union.

However, Scotland cannot wait for the UK Government to act. Although devolution continues to limit what we can do, the Scottish Government is determined to use our powers to the fullest possible extent. That is why, in 2021, we convened an expert group from across the third sector, academia and industry to look at how, under our current powers and within current budget challenges, Scotland can build steps towards a minimum income guarantee. Such a change could be transformational, and I look forward to receiving the group's recommendations in 2024.

We know that child poverty, in particular, lies at the root of many of the greatest challenges that we face as a country, including tackling health and educational inequalities. The Scottish Government is unequivocal in its commitment to meet our statutory targets through "Best Start, Bright Futures—Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026". Delivering on our ambition will mean tough choices, and we will not shy away from the decisions that are needed to reduce poverty and support those who are in greatest need. Neither will we shirk from protecting people from harm, as is outlined in our missions.

Our programme for government sets out how we will work to deliver further progress on those

shared ambitions. That includes investing £405 million in our unique and game-changing Scottish child payment this year. The payment, which is worth £25 per eligible child per week, is unique in the UK and, as of the end of June this year, was reaching more than 316,000 children. More than £350 million has been paid to low-income families since the payment launched in February 2021.

To ensure that we continue to support people with the cost of living, we are committed to increasing the Scottish child payment, funeral support payment and all disability and carers benefits in line with inflation. I have to stress that, unlike UK benefit systems, the Scottish child payment does not have a limit to the number of children who can qualify for a family. That is a principle based on dignity, and it is a shame that the Tories and the Labour Party have long since given up on that.

To build on our action to date, we have now set ambitious plans to expand access to high-quality funded childcare by the end of this parliamentary session, starting with those who need it most, to help to tackle poverty and support thousands more parents to take up or sustain employment.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

The cabinet secretary might have seen some correspondence on social media last night from the private, voluntary and independent sector. People in that sector are not very happy with the Government's proposals, and they think that businesses in the childcare sector will still close. What is the cabinet secretary's response to that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We will, of course, continue to work with people right across early learning and childcare, but I will take no lessons from the Tories, who want us to follow the UK Government's approach, which is restricted to children with parents who are working. The UK Government is also determined not to pay the living wage, never mind the £12 per hour to which we are committed. Therefore, I will take no lessons from the Scottish Tories on how we should have a system of childcare in this country.

We will, of course, continue to work with stakeholders to make sure that we do what we can to deal with any of their concerns and that we build the best possible childcare system in Scotland.

We recognise that the cost of living is still far too high for many families, who are already struggling with the increasingly unaffordable cost of food, housing, bills and everyday essentials, as well as Brexit and the UK Government's economic mismanagement. That is why, both last year and this year, 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. Beyond investment in our Scottish

child payment, the support includes the continued provision of free bus travel for more than 2 million people, including all young people under the age of 22; the tripling of our fuel insecurity fund to £30 million this year; and the continued provision of one of the most generous free school meal offers anywhere in the UK, which saves parents £400 per eligible child per year.

We will continue to do everything we can within the scope of our powers and limited budget to tackle poverty and support those in greatest need, and we will strengthen support where we can. In 2023-24, we will invest £5.3 billion in Scottish Government benefits, which will support more than 1.2 million people, and we will extend the support that we provide to carers by introducing the carers support payment.

This year, we will invest £752 million through our affordable housing supply programme, and we will continue work on the housing bill, which will create powers for the introduction of long-term rent controls, create new tenants' rights and introduce new duties aimed at the prevention of homelessness.

We will introduce a landmark human rights bill and invite the Scottish Parliament to bring back the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill for reconsideration stage in order to deliver legislation that protects and enhances a fuller range of human rights within the limits of devolved competence.

We will, of course, ensure that we consult with the intention of introducing to Parliament a bill on the ending of conversion practices in Scotland.

By the end of 2023, we will publish the fair fares review on the cost and availability of bus, rail and ferry services, and, beginning in October, we will introduce a pilot involving the removal of ScotRail peak-time fares in a move that will make rail travel more affordable and accessible during that pilot.

This year's programme for government builds on the foundations that we already have in Scotland. It strengthens our approach to tackling poverty and inequality, and it provides equitable access to health and social care services and to treatment. We will continue to be frank about the need to make difficult decisions to ensure that we free up resources to target support, and we will always continue to stand up for the people of Scotland against the current UK Government and any incoming Labour Government with pale-imitation Tory policies that hit the poorest hardest at their time of need. That is not what the people of Scotland need at this time or at any other. As a Government, we will use the powers that we have to address the root causes of poverty, but it is only with the full economic and fiscal powers of an

independent nation that we can eradicate inequality and poverty in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the actions set out in the Programme for Government 2023-24 to build stronger communities, improve social justice, reduce inequalities, including in health and social care, and tackle child poverty; welcomes the investment of £5.3 billion in Scottish Government benefits in 2023-24, supporting over 1.2 million people, including £405 million for the Scottish Child Payment, which is currently helping to improve the lives of over 316,000 children; further welcomes the continued use of the Scottish Government's fixed budget and limited powers to tackle inequality and poverty and protect people, as far as possible, from the harm inflicted by UK Government cuts and austerity, as well as the ongoing cost of living crisis; notes the continued action to tackle child poverty in key areas including parental employability, early learning and childcare, mental health, transport, and affordable housing; welcomes that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023 as a result of Scottish Government policies; notes that reprehensible UK Government welfare policies, including the two-child limit and benefit cap, inflict hardship on families on the lowest incomes, with the two-child limit affecting 80,000 children in Scotland and removing £341.3 million from families in Scotland since 2017, and commends successful pay deals with NHS staff and unions that have ensured there have been no strikes in Scotland, thereby protecting patients and helping the workforce to deal with the ongoing cost of living crisis, and ensuring that people can access the social care support that they need, while recognising the valuable contribution of Scotland's social care workforce.

15:03

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to debate equality in relation to the programme for government, because yesterday's programme was nothing short of disappointing. Humza Yousaf promised us that he would be his own man and set out his own plan, but there is not a single word in the programme that could not have come from his predecessor. It is quite telling that Nicola Sturgeon is taking part in today's debate to defend her prodigy's plan, because she pretty much wrote every policy in the document. That is why the programme is so disappointing. When Scotland needed a bold, new and ambitious plan to tackle the big challenges that our economy and public services face, the best that Humza Yousaf could do was copy Nicola Sturgeon's homework and continue her Scottish National Party failures.

Before I continue to highlight the problems with the programme for government, I want to mention two areas of consensus in it, which the Scottish Conservatives have outlined in our amendment. On support for families affected by miscarriage, the First Minister will always have my support when trying to support those who have suffered a terrible loss, and I commend him for speaking so openly about his personal experience. I hope that that gives strength to those who have suffered a

miscarriage and I look forward to seeing more detail on that work in the coming months.

On childcare, as a new mum, I know not only how quickly childcare costs can rise but what other financial pressures go along with raising a child. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has finally listened to the Scottish Conservatives' calls to be bold and ambitious when it comes to the roll-out of free childcare. Empowering parents is something for which I have been calling for some time; simplifying the process for parents and giving them more choice over their child's care is the right course of action.

That does not take away from the crisis that is currently engulfing the sector. Although I will always welcome increased pay for carers, to judge by the reaction on social media last night, the £12 an hour staff wage went down like a sinking ship. The Government still does not get it—it does not understand the needs of the third and private sectors and of voluntary organisations. Staff wages are not the problem; the problem is that, in effect, local authorities set the rates per child for both themselves and their competition. I have asked this question previously: how can a Government organisation be a competitor and a banker at the same time? I make this plea again: fix the funding formula to create equality for the private, voluntary and independent sectors. They are Scotland's first educators and the Government must do more to support them.

I turn to the problems with the programme. It takes a lot of action to tackle violence against women and girls, which is of course welcome, but it is completely undermined by the fact that the Government is continuing to push forward with its Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. The programme was a chance for the Government to admit that it got it wrong and to drop the bill; instead, it is charging ahead with a costly legal battle to take forward a law that the vast majority of Scots oppose. They oppose it because everyone can see its massive loopholes, which allow predatory men to take advantage of the system. The SNP Government told us that that would never happen. However, last year, mere weeks after the bill was passed, we had the case of Isla Bryson—the double rapist who was initially remanded to a women's jail after being found guilty. If the SNP truly wants to stand up for the rights and protections of women and girls, it needs to ditch the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. A basic public health issue that the Government could focus on is the misinformation about contraception on social media, which could be contributing to the high abortion figures.

The Government has the message of building better communities. I learned quickly during my time as a councillor that the SNP rips the heart out

of communities by ruthlessly cutting councils' budgets year on year. North Lanarkshire Council alone will need to find £67 million-worth of cuts over the next three years on top of the £228 million-worth of cuts that it had over the past decade.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I am not sure whether the member has paid any attention to what is happening in England, where council after council—both Tory and Labour—is going bankrupt. Will she not take any responsibility for the lack of funding and the financial mismanaging of local government by her Government in England? What a brass neck she has.

Meghan Gallacher: I am not quite sure that the cabinet secretary understands the damage that her Government is doing to local authorities across Scotland—to community centres, vital services and swimming pools. If the cabinet secretary would like to stay for the debate that is taking part after this one, she might see the damage that her Government is inflicting.

I have learned, too, during my short time as an MSP that, to have stronger communities, we need better infrastructure. As we have seen during the SNP's time in government, fewer GP surgeries and appointments are available, our high streets and town centres are about to collapse and no real investment has been made into our rural communities.

While I am on the point about infrastructure, what about the A9 or the A96? Humza Yousaf's announcement fell flat yesterday because he committed to dualling the roads but could not tell us when they would be completed. I am not a betting woman, but I bet anything that, if the Greens were not in government, those roads would be further along than they are now. The Greens are anti-growth and anti-roads.

Finally, on tackling child poverty, the SNP promised to deliver free school meals by August 2022. Now it has announced the work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to expand free school meal provision to primary 6 and 7, but that provision does not even include breakfast, which we know is a proven way to set up kids for the day and improve their learning and behaviours in the classroom. Is the Government incompetent or incapable? Either way, it is trying to hoodwink the public into thinking that it is delivering for Scotland when, in fact, it is not.

The SNP will spend this debate praising its record on equality and saying that the programme will continue those achievements. It will be a session of ritual back patting and Nicola Sturgeon defending her legacy. However, beyond the spin,

the poorest people in Scotland are being failed by the Government. Drug deaths remain the highest in Europe, alcohol deaths are the highest since 2008 and homelessness has reached an all-time high, with children being placed in temporary accommodation. All the while, women and girls are being failed by the Government, which is hellbent on introducing a gender recognition reform bill, and by not having the correct public health messaging around contraception. Those are the facts that the SNP wants to ignore, but that is the reality that is being faced by people across Scotland.

The programme was a chance to tackle those big challenges. Instead, we have the same reheated promises from a Government that has quite clearly run out of ideas.

I move amendment S6M-10343.2, to leave out from “to build” to end and insert:

“; welcomes the announcement to improve miscarriage care, so that women do not wait until a third miscarriage to receive support; further welcomes the Scottish Government’s intention to bring childcare policy in line with UK Government proposals of providing funded childcare from the age of nine months but calls, however, on the Scottish Government to do more to resolve outstanding concerns, including recruitment, retention and support for private, voluntary and third sector organisations; notes that the Scottish Government has failed to close the attainment gap and roll out free school meals by 2022 as originally promised in 2021, tackle violence in classrooms, or bring forward a new meaningful deal for teachers; further notes that the percentage of children in poverty is equal to that in 2007, and expresses concern over the record-breaking number of children in temporary accommodation; calls on the Scottish Government to declare a homelessness emergency and to find a new approach to children being placed in temporary accommodation; is dismayed that the Scottish Government has missed its deadline for transferring all benefits to Social Security Scotland and that certain benefits could be transferred as late as 2026; welcomes the UK Government’s £94 billion to help households navigate the global cost of living crisis, throughout 2022-23 and 2023-24, and the UK Government’s uprate to benefits by 10.1%; notes that, during the Scottish National Party’s time in government, health inequalities have worsened, with record numbers on NHS waiting lists, high A&E waiting times, unacceptable drug and alcohol death rates and a mental health crisis, and agrees that a health and wellbeing strategy must be at the forefront of the Scottish Government’s plan to tackle inequality.”

15:10

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate for Scottish Labour on equalities in the programme for government, and I will begin with areas of consensus.

As Anas Sarwar outlined in yesterday’s debate, there are areas in the programme that Scottish Labour supports. We have long called for improvements in the pay of social care workers, so

finally seeing some progress in that area is to be welcomed, despite our being told repeatedly by the Government—including the First Minister when he was health secretary—that that could not be done.

We have also long supported efforts to improve access to childcare across Scotland, because we know that access to good, high-quality and truly flexible childcare can reduce poverty and support people—especially women—into the workplace.

Shona Robison: I want to go back to the issue of the social care workforce. I notice that the Labour amendment talks about

“a workable plan for achieving a £15 an hour minimum wage for hard-working social care workers”.

Given that Labour has set itself against any tax increase—whether that is income tax or council tax—could Paul O’Kane explain to us what Labour’s “workable plan” is to get to £15 an hour for social care workers?

Paul O’Kane: The Deputy First Minister well knows that, budget after budget, the Scottish Labour Party has brought to the chamber proposals on how we can accelerate to £12 an hour and £15 an hour. The former finance secretary said that £12 an hour could not be done and consistently refused to engage on those points.

We have long supported efforts to improve childcare. Of course, we support the actions outlined to move forward the work of Baroness Kennedy’s review of misogyny law and support women and families who have experienced baby loss across Scotland. We have heard very powerful contributions across the chamber in that regard.

However, let us be honest: the relaunch of Humza Yousaf’s Government, which is already tired after just six months, is underwhelming. Just 24 hours after the statement, it has been met with a lukewarm response at best from anti-poverty organisations, the third sector and wider civic Scotland. It has been described as “a timid step” in addressing injustice by Save the Children. The Poverty Alliance said that it missed a crucial

“opportunity to turn our shared values of justice and compassion into meaningful action”,

and it fails to meet the challenges described by Shelter Scotland.

The challenges before us are great. We face twin crises: the cost of living and an NHS on its knees. The response to those crises must match the scale of the challenge. Continuity won’t cut it, as someone famously said. However, continuity from the First Minister is exactly what we got.

The reality does not match the rhetoric. Instead of direct action and new interventions, we have a document that is full of pilots, proposals, exploratory work and steering groups, and many of those initiatives are just reannouncements.

The Government's flagship policy of removing income thresholds for best start payments is a reannouncement of existing policy, and it will do little for those in the deepest poverty. No new spending has been announced on the child payment; the SNP Government is expecting credit for maintaining the status quo.

On the annual recycled pledge on free school meals, that is now delayed until 2026, and it will begin with a limited roll-out. How many times will the Government promise and then not deliver?

It is clear that this is a tired continuity Government that lacks direction. The reality is that the SNP Government is failing and is out of ideas on how to turn the situation in Scotland around. There are clarion calls around Scotland that the Government is going to fail to meet its own statutory poverty targets.

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): Given that it is estimated that, so far, the Scottish Government's anti-poverty measures have lifted 90,000 children out of poverty, is that not the sort of thing that we should be continuing with?

Paul O'Kane: As I have just said, the Government is on track to miss the legally binding poverty reduction targets that have been set. Clarion calls have been made in relation to the fact that the Government is going to miss those targets. [*Interruption.*] No—I need to make progress.

No organisation has been clearer in making that point than the Fraser of Allander Institute, which has said:

"Missing a statutory target should be a big deal, shouldn't it? Instead we have had the equivalent of a shrug and a suggestion that the constitutional settlement means we lack the necessary levers."

We have already heard plenty about the constitutional settlement in today's debate. We are talking about poverty, on which we can and must do more.

Scottish Labour has offered interventions to tackle the cost of living crisis and to prevent people from experiencing poverty, but they have been ignored by the Government. We have suggested capping the cost of public transport, providing rebates on water bills, implementing mortgage rescue schemes and taking quicker action to pay care workers not £12 but £15 an hour. If the First Minister, the Cabinet and the Deputy First Minister are serious about their offer

to listen and work across this chamber, they must engage on our proposals.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way on that point?

Paul O'Kane: No.

I mentioned care workers because we know how vital health and social care are to ensuring that everyone in Scotland has the best life that they can, but it seems that health and social care are, at best, an afterthought in the programme for government and, at worst, something that the Government does not actively want to talk about. It took the First Minister 22 minutes to mention the NHS in his speech yesterday, and there is a similar absence in today's Government motion, in which there is just one sentence about health and social care.

More than 820,000 people are languishing on waiting lists, while more than 7,000 NHS vacancies remain unfilled. There is a crisis in our health service, which is being felt every day by people up and down Scotland. That is the reality under the SNP.

Hard-working staff are crying out for action, so where are the big, bold solutions to help to alleviate the pressure? Where is a renewed recovery and catch-up plan? Where is a meaningful workforce plan? Where is the action to properly fix social care to ensure that people can get out of hospital and live good and well-supported lives in their communities?

Of course, we recognise the reopening of the independent living fund, which we have called on the Government to do in successive programmes for government and budgets. As convener of the cross-party group on learning disability, I know that that will be welcomed, but we want the Government to move faster and further than it is doing with the phased approach that it is taking, so that the fund becomes more sustainable.

However, where is the further action on social care? In its 2021 manifesto, the SNP pledged to abolish non-residential care charges. Time and again, we have called on the Government to honour that commitment to disabled people and their families.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should be concluding.

Paul O'Kane: Each year, that commitment slips further and further into the parliamentary calendar for delivery.

Today, along with my colleagues, I met campaigners outside Parliament on the issue. Reece, Sandy and Kerry were just some of the

people who spoke to me about the huge difference that the removal of non-residential care charges would make for their lives, their wellbeing and their mental health. They told me how disappointed they were not to see that in the programme for government. Therefore, I urge the Government to look again at how we can abolish those charges quickly. We will work constructively with the Government, as campaigners want us to do, to deliver that.

It is clear that the programme for government was billed as a reset moment for Humza Yousaf and a tired SNP Government that has been in power for 16 years but, instead of hitting the reset button, it has been a case of pressing rewind on some announcements and pause on others. The reality is that the people of Scotland, rather than a reset or a rewind, are looking for change. Labour members are ready to rise to that challenge and deliver change.

I move amendment S6M-10343.1, to leave out from “to build” to end and insert:

“, and that no real action has been set out which will reduce child poverty or mitigate the cost of living crisis for thousands of families that are struggling to make ends meet; further notes that the last UK Labour administration lifted 2 million children and pensioners out of poverty, of which 200,000 were children in Scotland, while the last decade of the Scottish National Party (SNP) administration has seen 40,000 more children, and 30,000 more pensioners slide into poverty; notes with concern that almost 9,000 children are languishing in temporary accommodation without a home to call their own because of this SNP administration’s inability to get a handle on the scale of the housing crisis facing Scotland; welcomes the UK Labour Party’s commitment to a new deal for working people within the first 100 days of a UK Labour administration, which will lift children in Scotland out of poverty by delivering a real living wage and improved working conditions, and a fundamental reform of unfair and punitive Universal Credit provisions; condemns the SNP administration’s continued failure to resolve pay disputes with education staff across local authorities in Scotland; regrets that health inequalities are exacerbated by the inertia of this SNP administration; condemns the abandonment of over 820,000 patients stuck on NHS waiting lists for tests and treatment; accepts that this SNP administration has failed to meet its targets for tackling long waits with over 77,000 patients languishing for over a year; is deeply concerned that cancer treatment targets are repeatedly missed; regrets that the mental health crisis continues unabated with almost 2,000 patients waiting for over a year for treatment, and delayed discharge remains shockingly high, costing over £193 million alone in 2022-23; acknowledges that this is largely because of the SNP administration’s failure to fix the growing crisis in social care; calls upon the SNP administration to address this crisis by immediately removing non-residential care charges and set out a workable plan for achieving a £15 an hour minimum wage for hard-working social care workers; recognises that Scotland’s NHS is facing a workforce crisis, with over 7,000 vacancies unfilled, and welcomes the fact that a Scottish Labour administration would transform the NHS to meet the needs of future generations.”

15:18

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am pleased to have the chance to contribute briefly to this afternoon’s debate on the programme for government. Its title—“Equality, Opportunity, Community”—throws up issues that I want to reflect on further, specifically from an island perspective, but I start by saying that there is much in the programme and in the motion that Scottish Liberal Democrats warmly welcome. Indeed, there are quite a few things that we have been calling for. I might gently point out that there are a few initiatives—such as those on heat in buildings, free school meals and the fair fares review—that could charitably be described as frequent flyers in programme for government statements. However, in the spirit of consensus, I declare an obvious interest in those initiatives and confirm my willingness to work with ministers in the hope that they can deliver in those areas for communities such as Orkney, where there is particularly acute need.

Of course, the centrepiece of the First Minister’s statement yesterday, which features prominently again in today’s motion, is the commitment to further expand childcare provision. That is certainly welcome and it has been welcomed around the chamber. It is a good example of an issue on which Scottish Liberal Democrats have pressed successive SNP Governments to be more ambitious. My colleague Willie Rennie frequently raised it with Alex Salmond when he was First Minister, before he was airbrushed out of SNP history. Indeed, I remember Willie Rennie and the Parliament being told repeatedly that expanding the provision of childcare to 1,140 hours could be done only with the powers of independence. I was a member of the education committee at the time, and that assertion was repeated to us regularly by the then cabinet secretary, Aileen Campbell. It was nonsense, of course, and when Mr Salmond realised that it just made it look like the needs of Scottish children and their parents were being held hostage in the interests of the SNP, he relented and brought forward an amendment to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill.

That experience also showed, however, that the issue is not just about the quantum of early learning and childcare that is offered. Quality, flexibility and availability matter every bit as much, if not more. We know that, as funding for childcare has increased, availability has often contracted. More than 300 private and voluntary childcare services have stopped operating since 2021. There has been a 47 per cent fall in nursery teacher numbers over the past decade. Half of private nurseries say that their business is unsustainable, and a third of childminders have quit since 2016—a figure that the Scottish

Childminding Association expects will double by 2026.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Is it not also a truism that the families who have suffered the most in trying to gain access to child benefits are some of the poorest families in Scotland?

Liam McArthur: That point is very well made by Martin Whitfield.

Even if the Government succeeds in growing the workforce by 1,000, it will still not reach the level that it was at in 2019.

The lack of availability and choice poses problems everywhere for those who are most in need, but it will be a particular issue in rural and island areas. The number of childminders in Orkney has fallen by 40 per cent over the past decade. I know from my mailbag the real impact that that is having on my constituents—not least on women who are looking to return to or remain in employment.

On that theme of equality and opportunity in rural and island areas, let me conclude with a few areas where the Government urgently needs to up its game in the interests of fairness, equality, opportunity and community resilience.

Funding for councils has been squeezed across the board, but Orkney Islands Council continues to suffer from lower funding per head of population than other island authorities. Now more than ever, that is resulting in cuts to services on which some of the most vulnerable in my constituency rely. We need to see a more equitable settlement across our islands.

On transport, the First Minister promised “new ferries”, albeit ones that are already in construction. To date, though, that has excluded replacement of Orkney’s ageing internal fleet, despite the fact that it is as crucial in providing a lifeline to the islands in my constituency as the CalMac Ferries fleet is to islands on the west coast. The task force that was set up to look at that issue needs to deliver and urgently map out a funded programme for ferry replacement.

On road equivalent tariff fares, the SNP Government has failed to deliver cheaper fares on Pentland Firth routes to match those that have been in place for a decade and more on the west coast. SNP ministers blame UK state aid rules, having previously blamed European Union state aid rules, but the Scottish Government has confirmed that it has made no effort to agree a way forward with the UK Government.

The Government’s failure to deliver on its promise of superfast broadband to 100 per cent of premises by 2021 means that the digital divide between the haves and the have-nots remains as

wide as ever. Orkney has the poorest coverage and slowest speeds anywhere in the country, which affects access to services, education, business opportunities and much more. The digital divide undermines whatever aspirations the Government might have in terms of equality, opportunity and building resilient communities.

There are many more examples that I could cite that illustrate the mismatch between promises made by SNP ministers and the daily reality for islanders. The programme for government repeats some of those promises and adds quite a few more. Making such promises is easy. What islanders—and people across Scotland—want to see, though, is a commitment to painstaking delivery. That will be the real test of what the First Minister set out yesterday.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to the open debate. I remind members that their speeches should be up to six minutes long.

15:24

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Before I focus on some of the equality measures that are set out in the programme for government, I put on the record how pleased I was yesterday to hear the commitment to bring forward legislation to tackle dangerous cladding on residential buildings, which is an issue that I have been working on very closely with hundreds of residents in my constituency. I met the housing minister a number of times and have even raised the issue during First Minister’s question time. That commitment is a hallmark of a Government that has engaged and responded.

If Scots were ever in any doubt about the massive gap between the priorities of the Edinburgh and London Governments, the programme for government that was announced yesterday demonstrated it very clearly. The Tory UK Government is guilty of negligence and responsible for economic disaster, and it was the incompetent and uncaring architect of the cost of living crisis. All the while, a Labour so-called Opposition sits back and supports the status quo.

Here, in Scotland, meanwhile, we have a First Minister and a Scottish Government with an agenda for change that will empower women, lift children out of poverty and protect our minority groups while promoting growth. Let us be clear that no community can reach its full potential unless all its constituent parts have equal opportunities to contribute. The programme for government and the proposed human rights bill show a true understanding of that, and I look forward to scrutinising the bill with colleagues as it progresses through the Parliament.

The Scottish Government's record on LGBT+ equality can be measured on the streets. In July, I joined thousands of marchers going through Glasgow city centre for Mardi Gla. That minority group feels supported by Government in ways that it perhaps did not 15 or 20 years ago. In response to an Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee report on banning LGBT+ conversion therapy practices, the Scottish Government said in March 2022 that it was committed to bringing forward legislation, as far as practical within the powers available to it, by the end of 2023. I welcome the update from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on the timescales. I ask that that be done in a sensitive way so as to avoid retraumatising the people whom we have to listen to.

I am encouraged that such a significant proportion of the Scottish Government's priorities focus heavily on building a society where women are safer and can contribute better. That includes support for Gillian Mackay's work to introduce safe buffer zones and the legislation that is to be introduced on misogyny. However, I would welcome any update that the cabinet secretary may have on the progress of the public sector equality duty review, because equal treatment, protection and opportunity in our public services is the gold standard that we all have a right to expect.

Along with many colleagues, I welcome the expansion in childcare, which will be a significant boost for women and their households. In the previous session, Parliament passed its ratification of the UNCRC. I am encouraged that the Scottish Government is working with the Supreme Court ruling on that, and I would welcome an update on when we can expect the amended bill's return.

We must recognise, as colleagues have done, the significance of the Scottish child payment to families with lower incomes. That benefit does not exist elsewhere in the UK. I met the Child Poverty Action Group during the summer recess and, having called the introduction of the Scottish child payment a game changer, I am pleased that the First Minister committed yesterday to assessing how much further the benefit can go in supporting children from lower-income households, although there are clear constraints on the Parliament's spending ability and, sadly, it comes down to the money.

However, let us not forget that, while the Scottish Government gives with one hand, the Tory Government takes away with cruel policies such as the two-child limit on benefits and the rape clause. That policy penalises one in 10 children and costs families an estimated £3,235 per year, yet it is—shamefully—supported by Keir Starmer and the Labour Party. Yet again, Labour offers no

alternative to the Tories. I note that the Scottish Labour leader has still not responded to my letter to him calling on him to reconsider his position on reversing the two-child cap and the rape clause, which he considers not to be a priority.

Labour might want to stand by while folk all over the country struggle—that is their prerogative—but the people of Scotland can see that the alternative is here. The people of Scotland can see that, as far as possible, this devolved Government has announced a programme for government that will be a game changer, continuing to lift more and more people out of poverty and increasing their opportunities. It is a positive blueprint for change and a vote of confidence in the potential of a country and its people. I welcome the programme for government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have some time in hand, so there is time for members to take interventions should they wish to do so.

15:30

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I found it interesting that Kaukab Stewart majored on priorities, because I listened carefully to the First Minister's speech yesterday, in which he explicitly committed to reducing poverty. I listened to what he said and to what he did not say.

The Government's motion is titled "Equality within the 2023 to 2024 programme for government". If we start from the position that education is a priority and is key to understanding and then addressing poverty and inequalities, it is staggering that there have been so few mentions of schools.

I believe that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills also cares deeply about that, so it worries me even more that it would be deeply irresponsible for the First Minister and his cabinet secretary to sideline the portfolio and relegate education from the number 1 priority to something that is far from it.

Kevin Stewart: I agree that education is a priority but, when I have talked to many teachers in my constituency over the years, they have said that it is difficult to teach a child who has a hungry belly in the morning. The Government has made a difference through free school meal provision, and the Tories should consider that poor children often go to school hungry, which means that they are unable to learn, and that is because of Tory austerity.

Liam Kerr: Part of what Mr Stewart said included an important point, which is that Magic Breakfast says that Scotland is an outlier when it

comes to having no nationally funded breakfast provision, as the member knows.

If we are going to talk about food in schools, Mr Stewart, a great example of the Scottish Government taking its eye off the ball comes from the 2021-22 programme for government, in which the SNP promised to provide free school meals to all primary schools by August 2022—incidentally, the First Minister seemed to have forgotten that when he spoke on the radio this morning. Yesterday, the First Minister confirmed the words on page 40 of this year's programme for government, which says that provision will not be universal until 2026—four years later than promised. That was despite acknowledgement of the point that Kevin Stewart made, which is that yesterday's programme says that the

“highest standards of nutrition”

are

“vital to our children's effective learning.”

That is why the 2021-22 programme for government committed to delivering free breakfasts to all primary and special school children and to starting to pilot provision, which was not mentioned at all in yesterday's programme for government.

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

Liam Kerr: I will carry on and take an intervention if I have time.

That is exactly the sort of smoke and mirrors that the First Minister is employing, and we have to get away from it. For example, page 36 of the programme for government says:

“We have seen good progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap since the pandemic”.

However, according to the 2023 Scottish Qualifications Authority monitoring report, the attainment gap has widened for the third year in a row at national 5 and higher level. Worse is that—despite the efforts of teachers, staff and pupils—attainment has dropped, with SQA attainment statistics showing that the A to C pass rates at national 5, higher and advanced higher are all lower than they were in 2022.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will Liam Kerr welcome the fact that we have record positive destinations figures for our young people? While he is at it, will he join me and the First Minister in encouraging the Prime Minister to support the essentials guarantee? If he is genuinely interested in putting food into the stomachs of our young people, he should support us to ensure that the welfare state allows that in areas that are still mostly reserved.

Liam Kerr: Of course I welcome positive destinations, but the cabinet secretary has

conveniently failed to remember that, when we talk about destinations post school, there have been 140,000 fewer college places since the SNP came to power. Our Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data shows that there has been a year-on-year reduction in the number of people going, which has to be taken into account.

The point that I made before the intervention was that the situation was despite the best efforts of our teachers, staff and pupils. I do not for one minute lay this at the door of our schools, the staff or the students themselves; I lay it entirely at the door of a Government that promised to recruit 3,500 additional teachers last year but has overseen a fall of 92 in the numbers—a Government that runs a teacher qualification scheme under which the proportion of post-probationers who are teaching in the year following their probation is at its lowest level since 2016 and a Government that leaves at least 5,000 of our teachers on temporary contracts and has presided over what the *Daily Record* calls

“an epidemic of youth violence”.

As we learned yesterday from the school estates statistics, the Government presides over a situation in which 60,000 pupils are being taught in schools that are in a poor or bad condition. [*Interruption.*]

Shona Robison: Seriously! Will the member give way on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member will be concluding shortly.

Liam Kerr: There are many warm words in the programme for government, but precious few for education. That is a pity because—as I said—I respect the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I know that she shares my desire to get it sorted. That is why I hope that she will be receptive to our policies to ensure that funding follows the child, to give headteachers more powers over their schools and to empower teachers through a new deal for teachers. I look forward to working with her on that. Part of that is about ensuring that education is always on the agenda, including in relation to motions that forget about it—such as today's motion. That is why I ensured that it was in the amendment in the name of Meghan Gallacher, and that is why I ask the chamber to support that amendment.

15:37

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): This is my first speech here solely as the MSP for Glasgow Southside. It is also the first programme for government in 17 years that I have not been involved in as either First Minister or Deputy First Minister. To say that my perspective on politics

has altered would be something of an understatement. From here, certain things look different—perhaps a bit clearer, in fact—than from in the trenches of the political front line. I will perhaps return to that later.

First, though, I turn straight to yesterday's programme for government. I enthusiastically commend it. I cannot claim to be entirely objective, but it strikes a good—the right—balance between building on progress and breaking new ground. Much has been said about the importance of the economy—and rightly so. There can be no strong society without a strong, sustainable economy. However, the opposite, although just as true, has traditionally had less attention. It has been right to address that, and I commend the First Minister for keeping very firmly in vision the mission for a fairer society where everyone can contribute to and benefit from the fruits of the economy.

The economy will never flourish when systemic barriers prevent people from accessing the labour market—especially when lack of population growth is one of the most significant challenges that we face—or when poverty robs too many people of opportunity and fulfilment.

I am extremely proud of the doubling of early years education and childcare provision, which is a vitally important infrastructure project as well as a social initiative. I am also proud of the establishment of the Scottish child payment. Those measures deliver immediate benefits—especially to the 90,000 children who are being lifted out of poverty right now—but the real value will be in the long term. In that vein, I very much welcome plans to further expand childcare. The pilot that was announced yesterday is a sensible approach, and I hope very much that it will lead to mainstreamed provision as soon as possible.

I take the opportunity to mention the Promise to our care-experienced young people—a mission that is, and always will be, close to my heart.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The member will be aware of The Promise oversight board. In June, the board issued a report that said that it

“does not believe that delivering the original aims of Plan 21-24 is realistic by next year.”

Does she agree with the board's assessment?

Nicola Sturgeon: I believe that that is the case right now, but I do not believe that that is inevitably what has to be. That brings me exactly to the point that I wanted to make.

The Promise is, and always will be, a mission that is close to my heart. Relevant to the point that the member raises is that, as in so many areas, there is a need to make up for time lost to the pandemic, which is why I welcome and applaud

the focus that a new Cabinet sub-committee will bring.

The Promise is about improving the lives of young people in care, but we must remember that it is also about something else—supporting families better so that fewer young people need to go into care in the first place. To that end, I look forward to hearing about progress in financing and implementing the critically important whole family wellbeing fund.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I recognise the contribution of the whole family wellbeing fund. However, will the member recognise that, 18 months into the pilot in Glasgow, not a penny has been commissioned yet, and organisations such as Govan Home and Education Link Project that are critical in delivering such services really need some of that money?

Nicola Sturgeon: I recognise that. It is why progress needs to be accelerated, which is why I mentioned that point.

Another aspect of the programme for government that merits close attention is action to accelerate the green transition, which is essential to safeguarding the planet and building a fairer society. It is also the most important opportunity that we have to achieve sustainable economic growth. I welcome plans to take forward recommendations from the First Minister's investor panel, which was established towards the end of my time in office.

Moving away from fossil fuels, which we must do, does not mean turning off the North Sea taps overnight—as some mischaracterise it—but turning on new taps. The First Minister is right to criticise the UK Government's approach. That approach will make a marginal difference to the lifespan of the North Sea, but it comes at a heavy cost to the environment and to the focus that we need on building renewables capacity as quickly as possible. Lastly on the climate, I look forward to seeing Scotland's world-leading commitments on financing for the loss and damage that the global south has suffered taken forward fully.

I will conclude with a few words not so much on what we do in the Parliament as on how we do it. Before that, I accept my share of responsibility for the state of our political discourse. If anything, though, that makes me more determined to play a part in trying to change it. Polarisation in politics is much maligned. It is the paralysis of action that it can result in that should worry us most. As we embark on a new parliamentary term, perhaps we need to have some principles in mind to guide us.

The first principle is a collective recognition that the challenges that we face require tough decisions, which are by definition hard and often unpopular and will always meet resistance from

those who benefit from the status quo. That is not an argument for ignoring those voices, but it is important that we make sure that they do not become an automatic veto on the change that is necessary.

The second point is an acceptance that we cannot just wish for the ends of our policy objectives; we must also have the means to deliver. That means that we need mature debate on how we pay for our policy priorities and on the powers that the Parliament has and needs.

I want the Parliament to be independent and believe that it soon will be. I do not think that I am creating news with that statement. However, that will never stop me from arguing for incremental change along the way. Likewise, those who oppose independence should not close their minds to new powers that allow us to better tackle the big challenges that we face here and now.

Finally, disagreement and robust debate are not just the essence of democracy; they are part of what makes us human. However, the dynamic that that creates is not fixed—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister, you need to conclude—I am sorry; I mean, Nicola Sturgeon, you need to conclude. Whoops. *[Laughter.]*

Nicola Sturgeon: —it is up to us to choose. Will we choose acrimony and stalemate, or will we use the creative tension to drive improvement for all? I hope that, in this term, we will see more of the latter than the former, and I look forward to playing my part in it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a bit of time in hand, so I can be generous when interventions have been taken.

15:45

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I note the commitments of the cabinet secretary and the Government on child poverty, health and social justice, but I hope that I will be forgiven for pointing out that it is all very vague. Unfortunately, however, I think that we can all agree that vague is pretty much what we have come to expect from this Government. Further, not only do the SNP's back-bench members expect it, they accept it.

After 16 years of varying incompetence and financial mismanagement, we are left with another programme for government that does not amount to much more than carrying on and papering over the cracks. It is a programme for government that suggests that this Administration has run out of ideas and run out of road. Indeed, it is a programme for government that has been described by key stakeholders as timid. Scots are

being told of council tax and income tax rises to come, and the top line in this programme for government is one that has been pushed for relentlessly by Scottish Labour: the £12 for carers. However, that £12 for carers is seven months away and it is more than a year since Humza Yousaf first made that promise. We need it now, and we need a route to £15 an hour.

Shona Robison: Will the member take an intervention?

Carol Mochan: We have had discussion on that point already, thank you.

Another new flagship policy that was announced was that of removing income thresholds for the best start payments. However, that is not a new policy at all. The Government is simply announcing again an already existing policy commitment. I think that we can do a lot better than that.

Health inequalities in Scotland are growing. We are two years into the so-called NHS recovery plan and it would be fair to say that things are not going well. Some 820,000 people are on waiting lists, more than 7,000 NHS vacancies remain unfilled and getting a dentist appointment is becoming increasingly difficult—it is borderline impossible in a region such as mine, the South of Scotland. By definition, our recovery plan should see things improve, no matter how slowly. However, under this SNP Government, things continue to get worse, and this programme for government highlights the fading ambition of a tired party of government.

Getting those things right provides the basic building blocks of a successfully run health service, but ours is crumbling beneath our feet, despite the best efforts of staff, who are overworked and underpaid. In public health, we are simply not moving with enough purpose. We see review after review of policies that the Government has considered and the enactment for years of a strategy with no real intention of delivery. However, just recently, we learned that alcohol-specific deaths have increased to their highest levels in years, with a tragic increase in the number of women dying. That situation will not improve by tinkering around the edges and moving slowly. We need real and lasting action and we need it now, and this programme for government falls very short of delivering on that, or, indeed, delivering anything. After 16 years, it seems that delivery is not this Government's intention.

Indeed, the same issues with the announcement of strategies but a lack of delivery exists in women's health. There was not even a mention of the women's health plan in the First Minister's speech to Parliament yesterday, and I have to say that I am not surprised. Health inequalities

impacting women in our most deprived areas remain deep and divisive; staff safety legislation that would support women working in healthcare settings has still not been delivered; and there are reports of community midwifery and screening services becoming harder to access in the areas where they are needed most. Our communities want change, but this continuity First Minister and his continuity Government are just offering more of the same, and the reality is that more of the same means suffering for the vulnerable in our population.

We know that social care was put under incredible strain by Covid, yet, after working their fingers to the bone to keep the country moving, carers still cannot see a route to getting £15 an hour from this SNP-Green Government. They will rightly wonder if they will ever receive a decent wage from it. They are justified in concluding that the Government does not value their work enough. I look to the Green members, who have promised that section of our workforce a lot.

There is an alternative. The next UK Labour Government will fundamentally reform universal credit so that there is a proper safety net for people who are struggling to find work.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Carol Mochan: I will continue, thank you.

Within the first 100 days of that Government, we will deliver a new deal for working people that will ban zero-hours contracts, extend sick pay and ensure that the minimum wage is a wage that people can live on. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mochan, I am sorry to interrupt, but would you resume your seat for one wee second?

Could we have less chitchat across the front benches? It is disrespectful to Ms Mochan, who is trying to make her contribution.

Please continue, Ms Mochan.

Carol Mochan: The measures that I mentioned will have a direct impact on inequality and give families the ability to make choices that can help them to build for the future without having to constantly worry about whether they can make ends meet.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Given that Keir Starmer has said that he and Anas Sarwar are

“welded’ together on key issues”

and that the Labour Party promotes change, will Ms Mochan explain how Keir Starmer intends to make the rape clause be implemented “more fairly”? What does that mean?

Carol Mochan: I wish that the Government wanted to talk about its own programme for government. I have set out exactly why—

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is trying to conclude her remarks.

Carol Mochan: I am going to make progress.

I have set out some of the things that Labour has said that it will do in government at Westminster. The point that should be made to the front-bench members of the SNP Government is that Labour will deliver. We have a history of delivering. When Labour was last in power across the UK, we lifted 2 million children out of poverty, 200,000 of whom were in Scotland. There are now 40,000 more children living in poverty in Scotland than there were a decade ago. That is the SNP’s legacy and it will not be erased by such underwhelming reform as the SNP proposes.

In the here and now, we have to recognise that Scots have suffered through serious financial and health concerns due to the cost of living and the growing NHS crisis. Those same people will expect a bit more from the first programme for government from the First Minister. I imagine that many of them have been left disappointed. I hope that SNP members will consider those points.

15:52

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): During these challenging times as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic and deal with the horrors of Brexit and the brutality of 13 years of Westminster austerity, people have to face the Tory-made cost of living crisis. Now more than ever, the people of Scotland need a Scottish Government that is on their side. That is why I am pleased that the focus of the programme for government is on reducing poverty, creating sustainable growth and providing quality public services.

I welcome the ambition to increase childcare provision and make it even fairer and more affordable for the people who need it most. I welcome the decision to raise the pay of childcare staff and social care workers, who tirelessly work to support the most vulnerable in our society. I also welcome the fact that we will continue to build a social security system in Scotland that is based on dignity, fairness and respect.

At the end of last year, *Financial Times* analysis called the UK a poor society

“with some very rich people”.

We have an enormous wealth gap, which is ever increasing across the UK. However, most other

countries in Europe—countries that are comparable to Scotland—are wealthier and fairer. They, of course, are independent. That is why I want an independent Scotland. I believe that we could do much better.

Within the powers that we have, we have spent more than £700 million in the past five years mitigating Westminster welfare cuts. The Scottish Government has helped to improve the lives of more than 316,000 children with the introduction of the game-changing Scottish child payment, and we have delivered more affordable housing per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. However, we could do so much more as an independent nation with all the levers of power.

Talking of independence, I can hardly advocate for freedom and independence for our country without thinking of freedom and independence for all our people. Disabled people have been hit badly during the pandemic and by Brexit and the cost of living crisis. Many feel that they have not been served well by public services and that they have not had the support that they require. I am therefore very happy to see a commitment by the First Minister to reopen the independent living fund to allow more disabled people to control—

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will in a minute.

The independent living fund will allow more disabled people to control their own care and lives, and it will give them the freedom and independence that are enjoyed by those who currently access the ILF.

Jackie Baillie: My intervention is on the ILF. My recollection is that the SNP promised to open up the ILF some 16 years ago. What has taken it so long?

Kevin Stewart: I think that what has taken us so long—and Jackie Baillie supports it—is Westminster rule and Tory austerity over the past 13 years. Those folks who advocated for the reopening of the ILF recognise that the Scottish Government has had its budget cut over the piece by the Westminster Government.

It is also gratifying to see that there is a commitment in the PFG to review the adult disability payment so that it meets the needs of disabled people in full. There is a pledge to increase our social security payments in line with inflation, and there is the ambition to replace carers allowance with a carer support payment to improve support for unpaid carers. That is all good news, but think how much more we could do with the full powers of independence and no Tory Westminster austerity.

We also need to do more to ensure that neurodivergent people, autistic folk and those with a learning disability can lead independent lives and access services, jobs and housing. I am glad to see that the Government intends to consult on the proposed learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill this year. I know that the minister, Maree Todd, has a fantastic team of people behind her to drive that work, and a fabulous set of engaged stakeholders, too.

Moving to improve the lives of people does not necessarily require new legislation. We should look to the good that is going on now. We Too!, an organisation in Aberdeen, has teamed up with Codona's amusements to hold a disabled-friendly night—hopefully, with many more to come. I know that such partnerships are growing in number across the country, but we should all be encouraging more collaborations and fostering a greater understanding of, and meeting the needs of, neurodivergent people.

Project SEARCH, which is a collaboration in Aberdeen between the University of Aberdeen, Values into Action Scotland and public sector partners, has been on the go for a decade. It provides apprenticeships for learning disabled people, which has successfully seen many folk get jobs, have more fulfilling lives and gain their independence. We should be doing more to encourage such projects throughout our country to bring new talent to our workforce.

Equality, opportunity and community are the key goals in the programme for government. It would be remiss of me not to say that, in order to gain equality, maintain opportunity and retain cohesive communities in the north-east, we must have a just transition that works and is supportive of the change that is required. We all recognise that we have to diversify and grow green jobs, and we should all understand that oil and gas still have a part to play as we move to net zero.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Stewart, are you concluding your remarks?

Kevin Stewart: I am almost there, Presiding Officer, thank you very much.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excellent, because you are quite a bit over time.

Kevin Stewart: I welcome the Scottish Government's £500 million transition fund. I share the First Minister's ambition that Aberdeen should become the world's renewable energy capital, and I am keen to support him and the Government to make that a reality. I welcome this programme for government.

16:00

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP.

The SNP has been responsible for health in Scotland continuously since 17 May 2007, when Nicola Sturgeon—here today, though leaving—took office as health secretary and ran it for more than five years. That was a time when she cut the number of nurses in training. It was also a time when serious concerns were raised about a certain neurosurgeon, Dr Sam Eljamel, who doubled as a Government adviser. Incidentally, despite patients protesting outside Parliament today, there is no Government backing for a public inquiry.

More than a third of patients are waiting more than four hours to be seen in Scotland's emergency departments. The situation is getting worse—not in the depths of winter but in high summer. We know that excessive waiting leads to unnecessary deaths. More than 820,000 patients are on waiting lists.

We have an adult mental health crisis and a child and adolescent mental health crisis. We also have record high drug and alcohol-related deaths because people cannot get the treatment and support that they badly need and want.

Scotland's NHS and support services are spiralling out of control on the SNP's watch. What happens when vital health services fail? Patients suffer, staff suffer and health inequalities soar. Across our communities most impacted by health inequalities we find the highest rates of alcohol and drug dependence, yet there has been no cohesive strategy and little in the way of action from successive SNP Governments to help families and communities.

The families of the 1,276 Scots who died last year due to alcohol are grieving the loss of their loved ones. Alcohol-related deaths remain their highest since 2008. When we add drug-related deaths to that figure—ours is the highest rate in Europe—more than 2,300 people lost their lives to drugs and alcohol in Scotland last year alone.

Here is a shameful statistic: people in the most deprived areas of Scotland are 15 times more likely to die from drug misuse than those in the least deprived areas. People in our poorer communities suffer the most because of the SNP's inability to get on top of its brief.

Emma Roddick: The member has drawn an important link between health inequality and income inequality. Will he welcome the measures that we are bringing in to tackle poverty in those communities, which will, of course, reduce those health inequalities?

Sandesh Gulhane: I would really like it if the Government was on top of its brief and actually did the things that we need it to do when it comes to healthcare, which I will go on to point out in the rest of my speech.

With regard to alcohol, the SNP has tried one flagship approach: to make alcohol more expensive, and thus, to be frank, deter the less well-off from purchasing it. The trouble is that we know that people are going without food instead. The minimum unit pricing policy has now been discredited by none other than the SNP itself. The SNP Government set out to put a more convenient and positive spin on a Public Health Scotland report into MUP by shoehorning words such as "significant" into the draft so that it could claim a slam-dunk success.

However, there is no slam-dunk success. The SNP was humiliated and it was accused of misrepresenting the analysis by spinning estimates as facts. The SNP also implied that its resounding success was based on 40 different studies that backed its policy. That was not true; it had to rewrite its public announcements.

It is crystal clear that more people—I repeat, more people—suffer alcohol-related deaths now than did in 2018, when MUP was introduced. In fact, men from deprived areas are drinking more with MUP in place, and others are switching to spirits. If we are ever to get a grip, people suffering from alcohol dependence should have the right to access treatment and rehabilitation. That approach—a right to recovery—is backed by front-line experts.

In the time remaining, let me highlight another key area: our NHS workforce. We have seen another increase in the number of nursing and midwifery vacancies, which now stands at over 5,600, and is worse across our rural and island communities. It is hardly surprising that the number of patients on waiting lists is over 800,000. This morning, I attended a Royal College of Nursing round-table discussion with student nurses. Many student nurses are mature students, and their number includes single parents. What was striking to me is that, when a parent decides to train for public service as a nurse, they lose the Scottish child payment that Shirley-Anne Somerville spoke for so long about. If you want to be a nurse in Scotland, the Scottish Government will take away your money. Our nurses are the backbone of our NHS and are crucial to tackling Scotland's health inequalities.

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has concluded. Thank you, Dr Gulhane. I call Maggie Chapman.

16:06

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland)

(Green): I begin by thanking the organisations, community groups and others who engaged with me in advance of this programme for government. I am grateful to them for their dedication to the communities that they support and serve, because one thing is clear as we talk about delivering equality: we know that it cannot be done by those of us in this place alone. It requires the sharing of information, resources, expertise and so much more.

Another thing is also clear: inequality and poverty are not inevitable. They are consequences of political and economic decisions and choices, and so that is our challenge—to make better choices.

The PFG that we discussed this week is not going to eliminate poverty and inequality in one year. It would not be possible to undo that fast the structures and processes that decades—indeed, centuries—of decision making have created, even if we had all the powers that we need. The UK's austerity agenda that we have endured also makes our task so much harder. However, the PFG signals a clear and important direction of travel.

My Scottish Green colleagues and I are pleased to see the Scottish child payment at the heart of this year's PFG. When we argued for the payment to be so substantially increased, alongside mitigation of the cruel benefits cap, we knew that it was the right thing to do. We did not know quite how desperately significant it would prove to be in this crisis of costs and inflation, which is, to be blunt, a crisis of greed and profiteering. Experts and academics, including those at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Professor Danny Dorling, agree that the Scottish child payment is the single most important intervention in anti-poverty action.

However, it alone is not enough for the children of Scotland. Those 300,000 children have already borne heavy burdens in their short lives, and they face more in their futures. We must build on the foundation of the increased payment to provide the shelter that they need from the storms that assail them. Those storms include real damage to the health of children who live in cold, damp, cramped or unfit flats and houses, and those who have no permanent home at all. We have laid important groundwork in protecting and enhancing the rights of tenants. That work, alongside practical action on homelessness, must be prioritised in the coming year.

Miles Briggs: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: I am going to make progress.

Health burdens, too, fall heavily on the children who live, play and learn in streets blighted by air pollution. For some adults, low-emission zones are a political football—part of the so-called culture wars. For children with asthma and other conditions, football in the streets can be a cruel joke, and the culture wars are literally a matter of life or death.

In addition to poverty, many of those receiving the Scottish child payment face particular injustices to do with who they are and who cares for them. We know that households that include a disabled person suffer disproportionately in this hostile economic environment. I look forward to the implementation of the immediate priorities plan and to the further transformations that must flow from it.

We know that Scotland still has a problem with racism—yes, it is structural and institutional, and it is also sometimes conscious and deliberate. Children, including Gypsy and Traveller children, face systemic and personal abuse and exclusion. The anti-racism observatory is welcome and has vital work to do and to enable.

We know that some of the 300,000 children who currently benefit from the Scottish child payment will be transgender or non-binary. Many will be gay, lesbian or bisexual. We want them all to grow up in safety, with dignity and equality, with their health needs met in the right place, at the right time, and with freedom from cruel and damaging conversion practices. The Scottish Greens and I will never renege on our solidarity with the LGBTQI+ community.

Some of the children receiving the child payment are refugees; many others are callously excluded from our support by inhuman and often illegal UK laws and policies. I urge the Scottish Government to push the boundaries of the possible, to mitigate those shameful acts, and to welcome all children fleeing from their homes, whether from Ukraine or other places of danger, conflict or repression.

We know, as a dark backdrop to everything that we do, that all Scotland's children face futures blighted by the effects of climate chaos. 2045 may seem a long time off in election cycles, but those who are babies now will only just be starting out on their adult lives then. Even the end of this century—the furthest reach of our everyday imagination—is a time that they can and should expect to see and experience. North Sea fossil fuel licences might bring short-term gains for a few but, for generations to come, they are warrants of death. For the sake of those children and the families and communities to which they belong,

the just transition cannot just be a technical project. They need—we all need—a future that is powered not only by clean energy but by creativity and, most of all, by care.

Every year in this Parliament, the context in which we work becomes more difficult. We act in the shadow of a Westminster Government that is shameless in its brutality and that makes no secret of its hostility towards our work, and a Westminster Opposition that is increasingly reluctant to oppose. I do not underestimate the obstacles that we face, but we can do things differently here. In this chamber, we have a tradition of co-operation across party lines, of attention to the common good and of imagining and working towards a shared generous future. We have the opportunity this year, particularly in shaping our human rights bill, to bring that future closer to hand. Let us grasp it with urgency, compassion and hope.

16:12

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Reducing poverty, delivering growth, tackling climate change and providing high-quality public services are rightly the focus of the programme for government that our First Minister announced at the beginning of this new parliamentary term. I was pleased to hear the First Minister describe his agenda as “unashamedly anti-poverty and pro-growth”. The better and fairer Scotland and the more equal society that we would all like to have require our concerted efforts to eradicate poverty, to tackle the cost of living crisis and to create opportunities for businesses and individuals to thrive.

Today, we debate equality, opportunity and community, and actions to build stronger communities, improve social justice and reduce inequalities. Those things will, arguably, make the most immediate difference to the people whom we serve. Like many colleagues from across the chamber, I spent the recess in the communities that I represent, doing additional surgeries and meeting community groups and businesses, to listen and to provide assistance where I could. Among the many and varied things that I and my office team help constituents with, one thing that is constant is the way in which poverty exacerbates every single inequality and any injustice.

People across Scotland have been paying a steep price for economic incompetence, austerity and Brexit. That situation has been caused by successive Westminster Governments over a number of years. In the past five years, the Scottish Government has spent more than £700 million on mitigating the impact of Westminster welfare cuts alone. The current cost challenges, which are being noticed by all but a few

households, are a crisis that is felt even more acutely and keenly by those who already have the greatest challenges, and it is harder for them to overcome.

Scottish Government action is making a difference to children and families in my constituency and throughout Scotland. Due to the policies of our SNP Government, an estimated 90,000 fewer children are expected to live in relative and absolute poverty this year, with the poverty level being 9 per cent lower than it would have been otherwise. One child living in poverty is one too many, but progress is being made.

The First Minister quoted the late David McLetchie’s warning about

“worshipping the false god of consensus”—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; c 376.]

and said that

“For the good of society ... where we need to pick a side”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2023; c 12.]

we will do just that.

There are two matters on which I will follow the First Minister’s advice on that front. The first concerns the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill. The aims and principles that underpin the bill are laudable; it is the right thing to do and it absolutely supports keeping the Promise. However, there is an undeniable challenge in balancing the rights of offenders against those of the victims who are harmed by offending behaviour. That is never starker than when both parties are children.

I am sure that MSPs across the chamber will recognise, from their casework, that there are situations in which the balance has been off and has not felt just, and in which the harmed child has been further traumatised by the actions of our care and justice system. The system intended to do its best for the child who caused harm but has—in particular, in cases in which a sexual offence has been committed or in which the harmful behaviour is coercive control and domestic abuse—let down the victim and compromised their safety.

That important balance of rights is not correct in the bill as drafted. Child victims will not have their rights realised if changes are not made. I am hopeful that the Scottish Government will work with me, Victim Support Scotland and others to get the balance right. I appreciate the willingness of the Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise to meet me—I hope that we can get a date in the diary very soon.

Finally, and again on the theme of justice and inequality, and reflecting on how poverty exacerbates inequality and injustice, I note that there are—as colleagues have set out—many measures to welcome for women in the

programme for government, but, to be honest, I am pretty dismayed to see no mention of legislation to tackle commercial sexual exploitation within the work on preventing violence against women. For decades now, the Scottish Government has recognised that commercial sexual exploitation in all its forms is violence against women. However, our legislation does not protect women from that particular violence. It is a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, and women and girls with the greatest vulnerabilities are most harmed. It is shameful that, in this country, men can buy sexual access to women online as quickly and easily as they might order takeaway food. That fuels trafficking and abuse, and it does not harm just the women involved; there are wider societal implications for women and men.

I call on the Government to do three things: to outlaw online pimping and the purchase of women; to hold traffickers, male buyers and those who exploit and fuel demand to account with the full force of our criminal justice system; and to provide comprehensive financial support and exiting services for women who are prostituted and exploited.

For me, a fairer country will be one where no woman is bought or sold, where women and girls have equality, where their lives are not limited by misogynistic society and where the communities in which they live are safe and free from male violence. Any attempts to tackle the pervasive misogyny that harms so many women and girls, as well as boys and men, will be futile if we close our eyes to the issue or look the other way because it is too difficult or there is not a comfortable consensus at the moment. The equal society that we all seek demands actions, which I hope my Government will take.

16:18

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): A week ago, Scotland's long-awaited Covid inquiry got under way. We heard, again, tragic stories from families who lost loved ones—more often than not, people who were in later life. It reminded me that, at the height of the pandemic, rarely a day passed when I did not have constituents raising their heartbreaking experiences—not being able to see loved ones in care homes because we failed to get our act together on testing; social care packages being removed when they were clearly needed; the pressure that people felt to sign “Do not attempt to resuscitate” forms; the loneliness and isolation that many older people faced; and, of course, the appalling death rate among people in later life.

During that time, when all the big decisions were being made I kept asking myself who, independent

of Government but with real powers and the ear of ministers, was championing the human rights of older people and ensuring that their voices and views were listened to. To be frank, the answer was, “No one.”

Now, the Covid crisis has been replaced by a new health and social care crisis, and it is the people who are in later life who are, again, bearing the brunt. More and more older people are stuck in hospital when they should be at home, but they cannot return there because we do not have the carers who are needed to look after them.

In order to manipulate the delayed discharge figures, others are being moved out of hospital into care homes, often miles from their home and family, as more and more care homes close. All those people want is to return to their own homes, but they cannot do so because there are thousands of care worker vacancies across Scotland.

I will never forget the recent case of a constituent whose cancer had become terminal and who no longer needed medical intervention—just support from carers to make them comfortable. Their final wish was to die at home. Instead, they spent their final days in hospital for no reason other than that there was a lack of carers to deliver the assessed care package that they needed. When we cannot provide carers in such circumstances, it really shows how utterly broken our social care system is.

I welcome the decision by the Government to back the long-standing calls by Labour and the trade unions for a pay rise to at least £12 per hour for care workers—albeit that it comes three years after those calls were first made and is therefore massively eroded in value by inflation, and is still six months away. However, we will not make serious inroads into the care worker recruitment crisis unless £12 per hour is part of a clear plan with a timetable—a first step—to deliver £15 per hour and proper career progression for those who do the invaluable job of caring for our loved ones as if they are their own.

Scotland has a rapidly ageing population that is growing at a faster rate than it is anywhere else in the UK. However, increases in life expectancy have slowed. Too many people are spending far too much of their later years in poor health with poor levels of care, and a growing number are growing older in poverty. There is a misconception that all older people are wealthy, but the Scottish Government's figures show that almost one in six people of pension age in Scotland is living in poverty. That poverty is often hidden—many older people quietly get on with their lives, not wanting to make a fuss. Pensioner poverty, which sadly does not merit a mention in the Government's programme, is on the rise.

We are in danger of another pandemic—one that is caused by the rise in the cost of living. It is a poverty pandemic, whose victims are 150,000—and rising—older people, according to the charity Independent Age. Yet, in the programme that the Government published yesterday, older people barely register. There is one direct mention, which is a claim that equality for older people will be advanced by the Government's

“engaging with the Older People's Strategic Action Forum”.

I welcome any engagement with the forum and its members, but I would also welcome engagement with the many other groups across Scotland that work with older people every day. However, the Government has not convened that forum for two years and the forum has met only four times in six years. According to the Scottish Government's website, the forum is chaired by the Minister for Older People, yet one of the first acts of the new First Minister was to axe having a minister with the phrase “older people” in their title, despite condemnation from members of the forum and others.

The programme for government is a missed opportunity to really engage in the issues that are facing Scotland's older people, despite the relatively modest asks from those who are working with people in later life. Those include the reinstatement of a named minister for older people, a dedicated pensioner poverty strategy and the creation of an older person's commissioner—an independent champion for people in later life, with real statutory powers.

This week, Scotland's new children's commissioner began work, and we wish her well. There are children's commissioners in every nation of the UK, and there are older person's commissioners for Wales and Northern Ireland and there is a growing campaign for one in England. Why should Scotland's older people not have the same right? It is little wonder that, in its 2023 big survey of people who are aged over 50, Age Scotland found that just 8 per cent thought that we decision makers properly consider older people's issues and that two thirds—up from 51 per cent last year—do not feel valued by society.

Too many of our older people face multiple forms of discrimination. Too often, they are negatively stereotyped when we should be celebrating the immense contribution that they make to our communities. We should put tackling the issues that they face at the heart of government. Sadly, the programme for government fails to do that.

16:25

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The Scottish Government has shown

leadership on equality and human rights, and that is an inspiration not only to many here, but to others across this land and beyond, throughout the world. Our First Minister's dedication to fighting for those fundamental causes gives me great hope.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

“Where, after all, do ... human rights begin? In small places, close to home ... Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Those were wise words from the former first lady and distinguished human rights champion, and they underpin our journey here, in Scotland, to become an equal and inclusive community that is free from discrimination, with our potential realised and full of opportunity for all.

Scotland is already making greater strides towards equality than other parts of the United Kingdom. In 2021, the Scottish Parliament unanimously voted to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into law in Scotland before it was challenged by the UK Government. That bill would have been the most important thing that Scotland could do to protect the rights of children and young people and I urge the Scottish Government to do all that it can to bring the legislation back as soon as possible.

When we passed the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill last year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said that it was a “significant step forward”. It was passed by a two-thirds majority in the Parliament. Yet again, our democracy and our progressive policies were vetoed by Westminster. Time and again, we march forward unapologetically on human rights only to be thwarted by a UK Government that is hostile not only to human rights, as we have seen with its vile Illegal Migration Act 2023, but to any part of the United Kingdom that dares to do better.

It should come as no surprise. Last year, the UK Government brought forward proposals to repeal the Human Rights Act 1998. Thankfully, those proposals have not made progress at Westminster, but that is the uncertain context in which the Scottish people find ourselves. It is for that reason that I wish to focus my remarks today on the proposed human rights bill in the programme for government.

The human rights bill would be a significant piece of legislation that could give effect to a further four of the nine core international human rights instruments of the United Nations. Those would enshrine a right to work and to favourable conditions of work. The bill would cement the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to adequate food and housing. In the context

of a Tory cost of living crisis and with the world's energy and food security threatened by Russia's abhorrent war in Ukraine, the need to guarantee those fundamental rights has never been more acute.

Yesterday, the First Minister spoke movingly about his past and present experiences of racism. Although racially motivated hate crimes are declining, 1,468 racist crime offences were recorded by the police in Scotland last year. We must commit ourselves by all appropriate means and without delay to a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms, and to promoting understanding between different racial, ethnic and national groups in Scotland.

The abuse and discrimination that are faced by women in society are as perennial as they are pervasive. To the surprise of no woman in the chamber today, that is particularly acute for those in the public arena. We discussed those issues at length on the gender-sensitive audit board, and I am particularly proud that, under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, we introduced the first gender-balanced Cabinet in the UK and that, under Humza Yousaf's leadership, there are now more women in Government than ever before. In Humza Yousaf's first programme for government, we have the potential through the human rights bill to enshrine non-discrimination, economic and social rights, and gender equality for all women in Scotland.

Many people with disabilities face barriers that prevent them from participating fully in society. Those barriers take many forms, from financial to physical to cultural. With that legislation, we can make it clear that disabled people have the same rights as non-disabled people and break down the barriers that prevent disabled people from realising their human rights.

Many other communities would benefit from having their rights recognised in the human rights bill, including LGBT people. On that point, I am relieved to hear that the Government is to introduce legislation swiftly to end abhorrent conversion practices. I look forward to ensuring that the rights of LGBT people are included in the bill.

With the human rights bill, we have yet another opportunity to distinguish ourselves from the cruel policies of Westminster and be a beacon for human rights. That will no doubt anger the UK Government, which is doing all that it can to undermine any Scottish progress. In the past five financial years, £700 million has been spent on mitigating the effects of UK Government policy on the Scottish people. The suffering and harm that are inflicted on us by this unequal union, day in and day out, cannot be emphasised enough.

It is the Scottish Government that offers real change. It does so with a programme for government that fights poverty tooth and nail, and which is proud and unapologetic about progressing human rights. We have made great strides in building a modern, inclusive Scotland, but we must not and will not rest on our laurels. Giving effect in Scots law to core international human rights instruments will build stronger communities, improve social justice, reduce inequalities and tackle child poverty.

The cost of the union is clear: it is a cost that is mired in inhumanity. In stark contrast, with its programme for government, the Scottish Government has, with true humanity, shown its commitment to the highest standard of equality for our citizens.

The Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:31

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I start by correcting the record. Earlier, I said that it took 16 years for the SNP to act on the independent living fund, but it turns out that it was eight years. In that time, 800 people with ILF packages died and the fund remained closed to new entrants, despite Nicola Sturgeon's promises.

It is fair to say that it has been an eventful year in Scottish politics. When we came to the chamber this time last year, few people would have expected that, this year, we would be sitting through a programme for government with Humza Yousaf as First Minister. I have sat through 24 programmes for government and this year's has to be the worst—zombies have more life in them than this offering. It is full of mentions of more working groups, more task forces and more oversight boards. There is more recycling of old announcements but no action. It is said that there are some days when years of political action take place. Well, the past year has felt as though a decade has passed in Scottish politics. From cash in envelopes to police tents in gardens, and from allegations of MI5 infiltration to camper vans, it is clear that we are now in the last season of the long-running soap opera that is the SNP Government.

However, I must admit that I feel for Humza Yousaf. This time last year, he would have had no idea that he would be First Minister, and there are few in this chamber who will not join me in realising just how daunting the task ahead of him truly is. The fact is that, after 16 years of SNP government, not a single one of our public services is stronger. Our NHS is in crisis and the economy is stagnant. Now, Humza Yousaf might not have had a long time to prepare for the

programme for government, but I already want to ask him whose programme for government it really is. Is it his, is it a leftover from his predecessor or is it really the Greens' programme for government? I do not expect to receive an answer. As is so often the case with this Government, secrecy and a lack of transparency guide its approach.

The title for this debate is "Equality". There could not be a more timely topic, because after 16 years of SNP government, Scotland is a deeply unequal place. In fact, inequality has got worse across a range of measures.

Let us take the NHS. Our health service was born with the sole ambition of providing equal access to healthcare for everyone in society, regardless of their means, but the fact is that, under the SNP Government, the very principles of our NHS are at stake. We have the scandalous situation in which well over one in seven of our fellow Scots are on a waiting list. That means cancers going undetected and people living in pain while waiting for orthopaedic procedures. It also means that those who have the means are going into the arms of the private sector, whereas those who do not have that financial option are left languishing on waiting lists. The SNP has allowed a two-tier health service to become a reality, thus widening inequality.

Statistics published yesterday reveal the brutal truth. More than 820,000 Scots are on waiting lists. Almost 80,000 patients have waited longer than eight hours in A and E in this year alone. There are 27,000 patients waiting for mental health treatment. Children—children!—are waiting for years to be seen while their mental health gets worse.

That is only one snapshot of the carnage in our NHS. In this year alone, it has been estimated that there have been more than 3,200 excess deaths. For healthy life expectancy, premature mortality, coronary heart disease and cancer incidence, the gap in outcomes is at its highest point since the statistics began. That is shocking, and members on the SNP benches should hang their heads in shame.

What about the First Minister's targets for ending long waits? They were set in 2022 but he has already failed to meet them. Thousands of people are waiting for more than two years. We all know that cancer is Scotland's biggest killer, but the 31-day target and 62-day target have not been met. In fact, the 62-day target has not been met since it was set more than a decade ago.

A and E is overrun. Delayed discharge—something that the current Deputy First Minister promised to eradicate completely—is once more on the rise. There are simply not enough GPs to

cope with demand, and Audit Scotland says that the Government's target for more GPs is not likely to be met.

Under the SNP, social care is also going backwards. Too many people are waiting too long for assessments for care packages and too many are waiting too long for the care packages themselves. Costs of care are rising; in SNP-controlled Glasgow City Council, they are almost doubling. While we wait, the SNP prevaricates about ending care charges—something that it promised to do years ago in its manifesto, but which has not been implemented. That is shameful during a cost of living crisis.

As for £12 an hour, we were asking for that three years ago. The difference then would have been a rise of about £3 an hour. With inflation, that would now be worth £13.83 an hour, so the SNP is still short-changing staff by a total of almost £2 an hour. The cost of living crisis has eroded the SNP's offer in real terms—

Shona Robison: Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: No, I will take no lessons from the cabinet secretary.

The SNP's offer has eroded in real terms and it is making staff wait until April. Shame on you.

NHS and social care staff have been let down by the SNP, from the scandal at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, where the health board is in denial and locked in a war of words with the inquiry, to NHS Tayside, where the lack of action and toxic cover-up culture fostered by the SNP has failed patients. The SNP has presided over a litany of problems in our NHS and social care, so it cannot be the one that we trust to fix it.

The people of Scotland deserve better than this incompetent, out-of-touch Government. Change is coming, and only Scottish Labour has the vision and the determination to get our country back together.

16:38

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): It was interesting to listen to the former First Minister's opening remarks. I welcome them, because our political discourse has become so defensive. We have seen that this week from SNP and Green ministers around their broken pledges and promises. Collectively, if we are going to solve some of these problems, especially those around equalities, ministers need to start to listen and work with other parties.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In that spirit, I will respond to a point that Dr Gulhane made about the Scottish child payment. The reason why the Scottish child payment stops is that it has to be

based on eligibility for UK benefits. In the spirit of consensus, will Miles Briggs join me in calling on the UK Government not to stop UK benefits for student nurses, so that we will be able to keep paying the Scottish child payment?

Miles Briggs: The cabinet secretary knows that I always welcome the conversations that we have. We do not have them enough, though. That is one of the points that I am making. Cabinet secretaries and ministers are just relying on Green votes now in this Parliament. That is fine, but they are making a mess of legislation as they do that. The legislation on short-term lets is a prime example of that, and the deposit return scheme is another.

I will start on a note of consensus, with aspects of the programme for government that are welcome and that we have been trying to progress with ministers. The bill to finally address unsafe cladding is welcome, and I look forward to seeing full details of that. I hope that, like in England, hotels and public buildings are included. The announcement to finally deliver a national allowance for foster and kinship carers is also a welcome step forward, but we need to see the detail of that.

As the former First Minister stated, the wider policy agenda around delivering the Promise still very much needs to be outlined and developed. I hope that care-experienced young people will hear more from ministers urgently in the coming weeks on how the commitments to expand holistic family support services will be delivered, as Barnardo's Scotland requested in its briefing for today's debate.

Paul O'Kane made a number of important contributions to the debate on cross-party consensus and the objectives and targets that we all agreed to set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which was passed unanimously by Parliament. We all want to eliminate child poverty, and I believe that that is a priority for everyone across the chamber.

In the time that I have today, I will return to an issue that has not been raised by ministers at all today or yesterday, which is homelessness. Statistics show that the situation in Scotland over the summer has been unacceptable, with a record number of children and families now declared homeless and living in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

When the cabinet secretary was appointed in April, I said that we, in the Conservative Party, would work with ministers to help develop and deliver solutions. To date, we have seen very little from ministers, who seem to have failed to see the scale of the housing emergency that Scotland faces, especially here in the capital, and to work to deliver the emergency response that is needed.

Cuts to housing budgets and council budgets are the wrong answer.

Shona Robison: How does Miles Briggs reconcile his concern about homelessness and temporary accommodation with his and his party's opposition to any policy that seeks to avoid the loss of homes being turned into second homes and short-term lets? How does he reconcile those positions? They do not seem to be reconcilable.

Miles Briggs: The cabinet secretary might not want to listen to me, but I hope that she will listen to Alison Watson of Shelter Scotland, who says that the programme for government offers nothing new to meet the challenge of ending Scotland's housing emergency. She goes on to say:

"Anyone in Scotland currently experiencing homelessness who listened to the First Minister today would have taken no comfort from his words."

The cabinet secretary should look in the mirror in relation to her record on the issue. In 2020, when 7,000 children were living in temporary accommodation, she said that she recognised that we must go further. In 2021, when 8,000 children were living in temporary accommodation, she was deeply concerned. In 2022, when 9,000 children were living in temporary accommodation, she said that the issue was a national priority. This year, we have a new housing minister who is very disappointed and deeply worried. That is a record of failure—

Shona Robison: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: No, I will not. I want to make progress.

It is a record of failure that the new cabinet secretary needs to act on urgently to turn the situation around. Every day in Scotland, 45 children become homeless under this SNP Government.

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I do not have the time—I am sorry.

There are 9,595 children living in temporary accommodation across our country, and there is no Government plan to end that situation. Scottish families have been accommodated in former hotels, guest houses and bed and breakfasts, and many have been left sharing toilets with strangers and cooking on kettles.

In many cases, it is not only temporary accommodation but inappropriate accommodation. The situation is escalating out of control. The number of homeless applications has increased by 9 per cent, and 16,263 children are assessed as being threatened with homelessness. The number

of children in temporary accommodation is at a record level. That is the record of this SNP Government, and it is shameful.

Children who have been homeless are three or four times more likely to experience mental health problems. Children who have been homeless have increased risks of ill health and disability, which is up by 25 per cent. Any teacher will tell the cabinet secretary, if she would listen, that children in temporary accommodation struggle to maintain relationships and experience increased anxiety. We need a completely new approach to the issue from the Government.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I do not have the time.

I genuinely hope that ministers will use this debate and the new parliamentary term to do something different. Measures to prevent homelessness are already on the statute book. We do not need a housing bill to take those measures forward; they are just not being delivered by local government, because it does not have the resources to do it.

In conclusion, homeless charities across Scotland and cross-party voices are raising the alarm. There is growing concern about the housing emergency that Scotland faces today. We need an emergency response from the Government now and we need fresh leadership from the cabinet secretary. I hope that she will genuinely lead from the front on this, because it has not been mentioned in any debate so far, but it is the biggest issue that ministers should have been dealing with during the summer. If ministers genuinely want to take forward a progressive agenda to address the housing emergency, they will have our support, but they need to act, because this crisis is developing ever more and every day.

16:45

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): I have listened to all the contributions during this afternoon's debate, and I must say that Miles Briggs, of the contributors from the Conservative benches, managed to finish on a high point, on his desire to try and find a new way to tackle some of the challenges that our society faces. I assure him that there is determination and willingness to engage in a constructive way when there are constructive suggestions to try to tackle some of the issues that we face as a society.

I, too, have sat through 24 programmes for government in this Parliament. My memory serves me better than Jackie Baillie's, whose memory—I

can only suspect—is clouded by time in this establishment. My recollection is that the worst programmes for government were the first seven that the Scottish Parliament had, which she obviously had a hand in. They were vacuous and lacked ambition. Actually, they were so unambitious that they left money in the bank account of the Scottish Executive at the time, which it handed back to Westminster because it was not even capable of investing in tackling poverty in Scotland between 1999 and 2006. I recall poor quality programmes for government.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Matheson: Let me finish my point, and then I will let Jackie Baillie in.

I remember very well the lack of ambition from that Government. I recall well Jackie Baillie holding office with a portfolio that included responsibility for tackling child poverty, but Labour handed money back to Westminster at that time because it could not use the resources to tackle it effectively in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie: I am so grateful to be able to remind the cabinet secretary—because clearly his memory has faded, too—that, when we were in government, our ambition to end child poverty saw 200,000 children in Scotland being lifted out of poverty. Child poverty has gone up under his watch and under the SNP, and now his ambition is to lift 90,000 children out of poverty. Where is his ambition?

Michael Matheson: As ever, Jackie Baillie is saying, "Let's just wipe out the reality of UK Government austerity and the impact that it has on child poverty." The impact started before Gordon Brown left office, with the austerity programme, and child poverty started to increase as a result.

However, the consequences of political choices in tackling things such as child poverty are very important. We went from a point when people in the Labour Party stated that we do too much social policy stuff and not enough on the economy, to when they told us that we are not doing enough on social policy to tackle poverty in our society. Labour then told us that we need real action on child poverty, but that we do not need any of that social policy stuff to deal with it. Then, of course, the Labour party said that we are doing too much on social policy, and then it said that we are not doing enough social policy, and now it says that Labour members are the champions for the rape clause and the bedroom tax; Labour is the party that is now supporting those policies. To add to that, Labour's shadow chancellor has said that Labour will follow the fiscal policy of the existing Tory Government if it gets into government next year.

It would be fair to say—I am being generous to its members—that there is a bit of a muddle for the Labour Party nowadays. *[Interruption.]* In reality, it is nothing more than a self-contradictory mess—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Michael Matheson.

Michael Matheson: —a self-contradictory mess that you have got yourselves into on social and economic policy. That is reflective of leadership of the Scottish Labour Party that does not have a principle to stand on, when it comes to tackling those issues.

Let us remind ourselves of the policies that Labour has also now wedded itself to. Who does the two-child limit affect? It affects 80,000 children in Scotland; it takes £341 million out of Scottish families' pockets each year. Of course, we also heard from the Conservative Party—your new buddies—when it comes to social policy. We heard from Meghan Gallacher, who said that we need a “big, bold” idea. Well, here is a big, bold idea for you.

The Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair always, please.

Michael Matheson: Ms Gallacher and her UK Government colleagues at Westminster could, with the flick of a pen, lift 70,000 people out of poverty, including 30,000 children, simply by reversing the cuts that they have made to benefits. That is the type of big, bold idea that seems to be a good policy to pursue, rather than coming here and pretending that you have concern about the impact that austerity is having on local services in local authorities.

The architects of UK austerity sit on the Labour benches and the Conservative benches. The consequences that you refer to are the consequences of the policy decisions that your Government is making and the impact that they are having on communities right across Scotland. So, do not come in here and lecture us on the actions that we should be taking to tackle poverty, because we are a Government that is doing exactly that—with one hand tied behind our back because of the impact of your own policies at UK level.

The Presiding Officer: I remind the cabinet secretary to always speak through the chair, please.

Michael Matheson: I will, Presiding Officer.

Let me turn to our NHS. *[Interruption.]* We are in a situation in which, if you believe what has been set out by the Opposition parties, the challenges that we have in our NHS in Scotland are in some way unique to us—that they exist here, in Scotland, only because of our actions.

When it comes to issues such as waiting lists in the NHS in Scotland, let me be clear and do some comparative work for Ms Baillie and her colleagues. In March this year, in Scotland, on average, 114 patients per 1,000 of our population were waiting on the treatment time guarantee. How does that compare with what was happening in England? *[Interruption.]* Using the same basis, 130 patients were waiting. As for what was happening in Wales, 237 patients per 1,000 were waiting. *[Interruption.]* I will be generous and say that I, for one, do not think that Labour in Wales does not care about the NHS. *[Interruption.]* I believe that they care about the NHS and that they want to—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Smyth!

Michael Matheson: Does Mr Smyth wish to make an intervention?

The Presiding Officer: I ask all members to refrain, please, from intervening from a sedentary position, when they are able to do otherwise.

Michael Matheson: I am more than happy to take an intervention from Mr Smyth, if he wants to make one.

Colin Smyth: Mr Matheson is the NHS minister in Scotland. What do his constituents think about lying on a trolley in his local hospital because waiting lists have gone up to record levels on his watch?

Michael Matheson: That is why we put a recovery plan in place, with an extra £1 billion to address those issues. Mr Smyth does not want to recognise the challenges that our NHS is facing on the back of the pandemic and due to increasing demands on our healthcare system. They are not unique to Scotland but are impacting on healthcare systems across the whole UK and globally. If Mr Smyth is particularly concerned about performance, he has only to look at Labour's performance in Wales, which is significantly worse. He can be assured that we will continue to do what we can to address those issues.

I will turn to alcohol-related deaths, which was raised by Mr Gulhane in his contribution. He made specific reference to minimum unit pricing. I remember a time in the chamber when the Conservatives had a sense of commitment to tackling the problem. Three people were dying per day from a preventable cause. Jackson Carlaw gave a commitment to supporting minimum unit pricing. He did that despite the fact that you, as the Conservative Party—I refer to the party's position, Presiding Officer—had opposed the initial attempts to put minimum unit pricing in place and had decided to turn it into a party-political issue. *[Interruption.]* I make the point again because I was on the committee that dealt with the matter. I

witnessed the behaviour of Conservative members who were on the committee at the time, which resulted in expert witnesses refusing to come back to Parliament and give evidence because of those members' behaviour. I will not mention whom they were, but it was recorded and set out at the time.

Labour opposed minimum unit pricing—a position that was taken by Jackie Baillie. The party orchestrated an alternative commission under Brian Fearon to come up with an alternative proposal. Those proposals fell flat on their face under the Parliament's scrutiny. The consequence of that was—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary!

Michael Matheson: The consequence was that getting minimum unit pricing through Parliament was delayed, as a result of the actions of Opposition parties at the time. That was the reality and consequence for what is, quite clearly, a public health policy. If we did not have it, that would have made the situation even worse than it is today.

I say to Sandesh Gulhane that I think that he does himself and his party no favours by seeking to undermine a public health policy that many leading evidenced-based experts have repeatedly said is making a positive impact in tackling the issue. *[Interruption.]*

If Miles Briggs is to be taken at his word, he might want to have a discussion with his colleagues in his party who are in the health portfolio, because if we are to try to tackle some of the deep-seated inequalities in our society, we need to take action on a collective basis and to recognise the evidence that underlines the benefits of those policies, rather than seeking to undermine them for narrow party-political purposes. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gulhane!

Michael Matheson: I am conscious of the time.

To draw my remarks to a close, I say that if we are to tackle some of the deep-seated health inequalities that we face in our society, we also have to recognise the social determinants of many of those inequalities. One of the most significant social determinants of inequality and health inequality in our society is austerity. History has repeatedly shown us the impact of economic austerity on people in our most deprived communities. We, as a Government, are determined to grow and expand our economy for a purpose, to invest in public services and to make sure that we tackle the root causes of social inequalities within our society. We may not reap the benefits of those things in our health service today, but we will in years to come.

I ask Conservative members across the chamber: "Are you, as a party, prepared to work with us in order to deliver that?" It is very clear, from the approach that has been taken by the Tory Government at Westminster, that tackling social inequality is no longer a priority. In fact, expanding social inequality appears to be the objective.

The sad reality is that a party that once said that it believed in strong social policy is now following the path of the Conservative Party. It is following the path of austerity, following the path of the rape clause, of the bedroom tax and of policies that push families and households into poverty—the policies that we know will drive social inequality and create health inequality in our society. One thing that this Government will do is stand up to tackle social and health inequality in our society. Ours is a programme for government that will deliver that.

Business Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-10340, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 12 September 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Drug Deaths

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Fiscal Framework Review

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 13 September 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 14 September 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Reconsideration of United Nations
Convention on the Rights of the Child
Bill

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Celebrating the Resilience of Scotland's

Food and Drink Sector

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 19 September 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 September 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 September 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Criminal Justice Committee Debate:
Tackling Online Child Abuse, Grooming
and Exploitation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 11 September 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

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

10300, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 2 timetable.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 15 December 2023.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-10301, on the office of the clerk, S6M-10341, on the designation of a lead committee, and S6M-10342, on suspension of standing orders.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 February 2024 and 31 January 2025, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 29 March and 1 April, 6 May, 24 May, 27 May, 13 September, 29 November, 24 December (pm), 25 and 26 December 2024, and 1 and 2 January 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (UK Legislation), that Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.—[*George Adam*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Meghan Gallacher is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-10343.2, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10343, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on equality in the 2023-24 programme for government, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Meghan Gallacher is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. There was an error in my voting app. I would have voted no.

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

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app also would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Simpson.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
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)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 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)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10343.2, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, is: For 31, Against 91, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-10343.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10343, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on equality in the 2023-24 programme for government, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app has not connected. I would have voted no.

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

For

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, 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, 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 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)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10343.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 19, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-10343, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on equality within the 2023-24 programme for government, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. For the first time ever, my digital voting system did not work. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-10343, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on equality within the 2023-24 programme for government, is: For 68, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the actions set out in the Programme for Government 2023-24 to build stronger communities, improve social justice, reduce inequalities, including in health and social care, and tackle child poverty; welcomes the investment of £5.3 billion in Scottish Government benefits in 2023-24, supporting over 1.2 million people, including £405 million for the Scottish Child Payment, which is currently helping to improve the lives of over 316,000 children; further welcomes the continued use of the Scottish Government's fixed budget and limited powers to tackle inequality and poverty and protect people, as far as possible, from the harm inflicted by UK Government cuts and austerity, as well as the ongoing cost of living crisis; notes the continued action to tackle child poverty in key areas including parental employability, early learning and childcare, mental health, transport, and affordable housing; welcomes that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023 as a result of Scottish Government policies; notes that reprehensible UK Government welfare policies, including the two-child limit and benefit cap, inflict hardship on families on the lowest incomes, with the two-child limit affecting 80,000 children in Scotland and removing £341.3 million from families in Scotland since 2017, and commends successful pay deals with NHS staff and unions that have ensured there have been no strikes in Scotland, thereby protecting patients and helping the workforce to deal with the ongoing cost of living crisis, and ensuring that people can access the social care support that they need, while recognising the valuable contribution of Scotland's social care workforce.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

The question is, that motion S6M-10301, on the office of the clerk, motion S6M-10341, on designation of a lead committee, and motion S6M-10342, on suspension of standing orders, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 February 2024 and 31 January 2025, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 29 March and 1 April, 6 May, 24 May, 27 May, 13 September, 29

November, 24 December (pm), 25 and 26 December 2024, and 1 and 2 January 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (UK Legislation), that Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Save Our Pools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10199, in the name of Liz Smith, on the save our pools campaign. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the importance of swimming as an essential basic skill, particularly among children, the obvious health and fitness benefits for the population at large, and its importance in reducing the life expectancy gaps between different communities; notes what it sees as the need to prevent accidents in Scotland's vast array of popular rivers and lochs and to enhance the wider social benefits that swimming pools provide as community hubs enjoyed by people of all ages; acknowledges what it considers the huge part that swimming pools play in attracting and developing talent at the highest levels of Scottish and British sport, most notably swimmers such as Duncan Scott, who was trained and brought up in the Mid Scotland and Fife region and who became the most successful British Olympian at a single Olympic Games, in Tokyo, and one of the most decorated Team GB medallists of all time; expresses, therefore, its profound concerns at the reported number of swimming pool closures that are planned across Scotland, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to urgently act to reverse what it sees as this unwelcome trend, as called for by Scottish Swimming in its campaign, #SaveOurPools.

17:14

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is my privilege to open the debate on behalf of many residents across Mid Scotland and Fife, particularly in Perth and Alloa, who have written to me about the plight of their local swimming pools and as convener of the cross-party group on sport, whose members have raised their own concerns. I also compliment Scottish Swimming on the work that it has undertaken. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other colleagues, some of whom have been campaigning hard in their local communities, and I sincerely hope that we can find some cross-party consensus.

Members know that sport has always been a large part of my life. During my time as a member of the Parliament, I have always sought to bring my outside passion for sport into my working life to ensure that the voices of sporting bodies are heard as loudly as possible by those who are in power.

I have been convener of the cross-party group on sport for more than 10 years, and swimming has always had a high profile among our members. I take the opportunity to thank Kim Atkinson and the Scottish Sports Association for

all their work. Their contribution is important because of the incontrovertible evidence that tells us why a healthy and vibrant sporting sector benefits us all.

That is why all of us are worried about the closure or impending closure of sports facilities—in this case, local swimming pools. I am sure that colleagues from West Lothian who join the debate will have some strong words regarding the proposed closures of the Armadale, Broxburn and Livingston pools. The public backlash about those in the news speaks for itself.

Swimming is an essential basic skill to acquire, especially for children, so it is frightening that the National Water Safety Forum reports that 40 per cent of children leave primary school unable to swim and that their opportunity to learn that skill is strongly linked to their socioeconomic background.

It goes without saying that swimming pools are an important facility for maintaining good health and wellbeing. The Scottish Government has said clearly that it recognises the need to improve the nation's health and address the wide life expectancy gap between many regions across Scotland.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Does Liz Smith agree that, with the cost of obesity in Scotland having risen to £5 billion and the cost from mental health having risen to £4.5 billion, any reduction in our access to physical activity is a false economy and that we should resist it as much as we can?

Liz Smith: How could I possibly disagree with that? I also pay tribute to Brian Whittle for the work that he has undertaken over many years on that point.

I hope that the minister will recognise that the decisions to close fitness facilities such as pools are directly in conflict with the aim of the Scottish Government, which is trying to improve our physical and mental health and wellbeing. Such decisions are completely counter-productive when we have the lowest life expectancy in the United Kingdom and an epidemic of obesity.

Swimming pools transcend the fitness aspect. They are popular community hubs that attract young and old people alike and are particularly enjoyed on family outings. I am sure that most people have happy childhood memories of visiting pools with their siblings, friends, parents and grandparents. Closing local community facilities, as we saw in abundance in the aftermath of Covid, leads directly to increases in antisocial behaviour among some younger groups who find that they have fewer places to go.

I will add a point about water safety. In Scotland, where we are truly blessed with a vast array of

popular lochs and rivers spanning the country, we also have by far the highest rates of drowning fatalities anywhere in the UK. Those have risen considerably since 2015, with especially grim statistics in 2021, when 57 lives were lost to drowning. That is an issue for young people especially because the influence of social media is having a considerable impact and is attracting greater numbers of people to enjoy the beauty spots across Scotland. That is an important point to bear in mind when we focus on the diminishing number of people with basic swimming skills.

On a much happier note, it is Scotland's privilege to be home to many elite athletes who have achieved much in the world of swimming. In the motion, I mention Duncan Scott, who is well connected with Mid Scotland and Fife and is now one of the most highly decorated Olympians in British history. In the UK, swimming is well and truly on the rise. At the most recent Olympic games, in Tokyo, the British swimming team won eight medals, half of which were gold. That was the most successful result ever and the most medals won in swimming for more than 100 years. All of those elite athletes developed their talents because of the wide access that they had to pools, many of them in Scotland.

I appreciate that there is no quick fix to the issue, but I hope that the debate will generate the necessary awareness to reverse the undesired and, indeed, widely unpopular trend of closing community pools. I am sure that the minister will tell me that it is an issue for local authorities, but there is also the important issue of decades of underfunding of local authorities. Covid has certainly increased the costs of running such facilities: the Observatory for Sport in Scotland pinpoints the multimillion-pound maintenance backlogs that have spiralled costs out of control and the unsustainable funding model. The Scottish Government has a crucial role to play.

When the Scottish Government negotiates the much-needed fiscal framework with local government, which I hope will include multiyear funding and planning, I hope that the issue of swimming pools will be well up the agenda. The UK Government has already moved on the issue by providing £63 million of investment to pools in England, which aims to address the challenges of current costs and improve long-term sustainability through energy plans. However, no such decision has been forthcoming from the Scottish Government. Why not?

Joe FitzPatrick confirmed to my colleague Pam Gosal in finance questions this afternoon that

"all the consequentials that have come to the Scottish Government have been allocated."—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2023; c 19.]

However, specifically in relation to Barnett consequentials for swimming pools, he did not confirm where they have been allocated. Will the minister confirm that today? If we want to save our community pools, that investment is desperately needed now.

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

17:21

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): First, I congratulate Liz Smith on bringing this important debate to the chamber. I will start with a rather petty, tongue-in-cheek remark by saying that the motion in question is remarkably similar to the member's business motion that I lodged back in April. However, well done to Liz Smith for securing the actual debate. Tongue-in-cheek comments aside, the fact that we lodged two similar motions demonstrates that everyone here has a desire to save our swimming pools.

I know the value that swimming pools can bring not just to local communities but to the wider area. My Coatbridge and Chryston constituency is home to the Time Capsule water park, which I am sure many members will have visited. I am not sure whether it is the same for the minister, but the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, for example, has told me that her first trip to Coatbridge was to the Time Capsule when she was a child. The Time Capsule is so synonymous with swimming that John McGinn, who is not from Coatbridge, tagged himself on Instagram at the Time Capsule during that particularly wet night at Hampden when we beat Georgia. That says it all.

The threat facing our swimming pools is multilayered. The high energy dependency of our pools and leisure centres is one of the most obvious threats. Figures reported by Scottish Swimming estimate that energy prices for swimming pools and leisure centres increased from £500 million in 2019 to £1.2 billion in 2022. More recently, a shortage of chlorine has resulted in an increase of up to 30 per cent in the price of the chemical, which has further squeezed the already tight budgets of our community hubs and leisure centres.

The consequences of losing our pools are also multilayered. It is self-evident that pools provide the perfect environment for people of all ages to learn how to swim and about water safety. In this period of warm weather, there will be many more people enjoying our vast coastline and over 30,000 lochs—as Liz Smith pointed out. That is without mentioning the increasing popularity of wild swimming or dookin—whatever you might want to call it—which I have spoken about in

Parliament in recent times. Learning how to swim safely is a key skill for everybody and, to be blunt, without pools we are risking people not learning that skill.

In addition to their role in water safety, pools are a place of exercise, which is critical for the maintenance of people's physical and mental health. We often talk about mental health and the increase in those with mental health difficulties as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. Exercise and fitness are a key way to improve and maintain one's mental health. Without pools, we are cutting off another vital link. Often, pool swimming is a form of exercise that many people can do when they are unable to do other exercises.

As well as playing a role in relation to water safety and mental health, swimming pools can act as community hubs, as Liz Smith pointed out. They are important social assets for our villages, towns and urban centres. They breathe life into their communities and have enabled the development of talented athletes who have done Scotland proud on the world stage.

Earlier today, during question time, I asked the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning how local authorities could be supported with rising energy costs, especially with regard to the implications for swimming pools. The minister confirmed that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that swimming pools remain sustainable in the future, while reasserting their importance for mental and physical health.

I will close by commenting on the parliamentary reception for Scottish Swimming that I sponsored in late March this year, at which we heard triple Olympian Hannah Miley MBE speak of her experiences of learning to swim and training in a local community pool. She said:

"I have very fond memories of my time learning to swim ... in a small 25m pool in Inverurie and the sense of belonging becoming a member of a club gave me. There was a whole community involved in the sport—from the friends I made in the pool, to the coaches who advised and supported me through good times and bad, to the parent volunteers who generously gave their time every weekend to support galas, competitions and training."

Hannah succinctly articulated what we risk losing with every pool that closes. I hope that today's debate will be part of the process of coming together to tackle the many multifaceted reasons for pools being at risk and trying to save them.

17:26

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will jump right into the deep end and thank my colleague Liz Smith for bringing the subject of saving our pools to the chamber for debate. I am happy to speak about the necessity of access to

swimming, which is so important for our children not only in a sporting capacity but for physical and mental development. Swimming strengthens the heart and lungs in infants, provides therapeutic health and increases cognitive and motor skills.

I would also like to commend Scottish Swimming on the save our pools campaign. As Scottish Swimming has highlighted, swimming pools often lie at the heart of communities and become places where home-grown heroes and champions are made in one of Britain's and Scotland's top-performing sports.

Look at the amazing country we live in. Scotland has one of the most beautiful landscapes of any country in the world. We have beautiful beaches with access to the sea, along with wild and wonderful lochs situated across the land. It is no wonder that wild swimming is rapidly becoming one of the most sought-after elements of individual healthcare routines, and Scotland is actively placed to promote it in our countryside. However, although participation in the sport is increasing rapidly, we face a rapid reduction in the number of people who will be able to experience it.

We are actually talking about a health and safety issue. Knowing how to swim is an excellent way to have a healthy life, and safety on the water is a life skill that we should all have. It is important that our young people know how to swim and that they know about the perils of the water and how to stay safe.

I make no excuses for raising the issue of swimming pool provision in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, as the closure of swimming pools is having a detrimental effect right across the region. I recognise the concerns regarding local authority swimming pools, and I am disappointed that we have already seen the Alloa Leisure Bowl close its doors. It is deeply concerning that Perth leisure centre was heading towards closure.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Does the member know that the Perth leisure pool is to close? Can she confirm that?

Roz McCall: I said that it "was heading towards closure". It was only as a result of a reprieve of a year, which was arranged at the last minute, that residents were given a short relief. They are now bearing the brunt of a 10 to 15 per cent increase in prices, with no guarantee that that will save the leisure centre in the long run.

Time marches on and, unless adequate funding is found, we will shortly face another round of local authority budget processes, when the headlines of the imminent closure of Perth leisure centre will again be splashed across the front pages of the Perthshire press.

Equally, in Fife, the local media are highlighting a similar issue. Fife is looking down the barrel of a fifth school swimming pool closure. Inverkeithing high school will be the fifth school in the local area to lose its swimming pool since 2003 if the proposals go ahead. In the past 20 years, we have seen the pools at Queen Anne, St Columba's, Dunfermline and Woodmill high schools close, with no replacements forthcoming. Now, Inverkeithing high is sitting under the funding sword of Damocles, awaiting the council's decision.

The slow erosion of local amenities is having a detrimental effect on the children in the area. Dunfermline amateur swimming club is rightly concerned and it has simply asked how exactly Fife Council intends to fulfil its obligation to provide physical education in the form of swimming and community-use swimming lessons in the area. I cannot help but agree with the club. It will take a concerted effort at national and local levels if we are going to change the direction of travel, and I urge the Scottish Government to look at its policies and to include statutory swimming lessons in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom does.

Swimming is a form of exercise that does not discriminate. It is perfect for everyone regardless of their ability, fitness level or age. Having a local facility is just as essential for elderly aqua aerobics as it is for butterfly time trials, lifesaving Brownie badges or simply swimming with pals. We must make sure that the joy of swimming stays open to all.

17:30

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I congratulate Liz Smith on her members' business debate and I whole-heartedly agree with the majority of the motion, except perhaps the last line—I might return to that later.

As Liz Smith said, we can be proud of inspirational figures such as Duncan Scott, particularly for the fact that he trained at Strathallan school in Forgandenny, which is in my constituency of Perthshire South and Kinross-shire. Of course, I am absolutely going to claim that the most decorated British Olympian of all time at a single Olympic games is a Scot—a wee play on words there—and that he almost certainly owes his success to the Perthshire environment in which he was brought up and trained, including the Perthshire air and water and the fabulous people around him, none more so than his mum, Joy. Mind you, getting up to get into the pool at 5.30 in the morning, seven days a week, the strict eating regime, the constant pushing harder, further and faster, and sheer determination to be the best might have helped, but I still think that it was

Perthshire that made him into the fabulous champion that he is. He is our Perthshire champion and we are keeping him.

Not only is Duncan Scott the most decorated Olympian, he is the most decorated Scottish athlete at the Commonwealth games level and he is Scottish Swimming's ambassador. Scottish Swimming's learn to swim campaign is sponsored by Scottish Water. He is a truly talented and remarkable young man. Despite being born in Glasgow and then living in Ayrshire and Alloa, he is—and I say this quite unashamedly—a Perthshire laddie.

Duncan Scott is also lucky to have had available to him the facilities that he needed to make him the superstar that he is. We want to have those facilities so that everybody, from babies to pensioners, can visit a pool, enjoy the water and get the physical and mental health benefits of doing so. Importantly, and particularly here in Scotland, they also need to have a life skill that is quite literally a life saver, as we have already heard.

We are all aware of the recent tragedies when people have lost their lives when wild swimming, but if someone has the core ability to swim, either from having had lessons at school, at the multitude of swimming clubs or through the learn to swim campaign that I mentioned when I was talking about Duncan Scott, I hope that that kind of tragedy can be averted.

I clearly remember my own swimming lessons in the freezing cold pool at Dunkeld Road in Perth, which smelled very strongly of chlorine. The teacher kept us standing at the side of the pool until everyone was ready, which just added to the fact that we were already freezing cold. That experience might not have been the greatest, but I definitely learned to swim. I was therefore delighted when my own children were taught at the then recently opened Perth leisure pool—a long time ago now, certainly—which was a much more pleasant environment. Anne and I could sit in the cafe in the viewing area above the pool and watch as our two cherubs were taught to swim like fish and put us both to shame. In fact, our eldest became such a great wee swimmer that she inspired her mum to go back and take a refresher course just to be better at it.

I am therefore completely supportive of the spirit behind the motion that Liz Smith has lodged. With that in mind, I commend the Scottish National Party administration in Perth and Kinross for making funding available this year to make sure that Perth leisure pool stays open, and its endeavours to ensure the long-term sustainability of that complex. It is in the process of building the new complex at the Blairgowrie rec in my colleague John Swinney's constituency, and I am

confident that it will find a way to do far more for the sustainability of the Perth facility than the previous administration, which was led by the Tories, did. That administration prevaricated for an entire term and refused to build the PH2O.

Roz McCall: The Blairgowrie rec that the member refers to was a proposal that was put forward by a Conservative administration, was it not? It was put forward by the previous administration, I think he would agree.

Jim Fairlie: Putting forward the proposal is one thing, but the previous administration—*[Interruption.]* The administration previous to the one that we are talking about proposed PH2O, but the proposal sat on the shelf and was never done. That is why the complex in Perth is currently in the situation that it is in. I hope that, in the spirit of this mutual accord, Liz Smith and Roz McCall will congratulate and support the SNP efforts in Perth and Kinross and make sure that the Perth leisure pool stays open.

17:35

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I thank Liz Smith for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

To be able to swim is to be able to exercise, socialise and learn vital water safety skills. That is especially true for our children, for whom swimming is a life-saving skill, and for older citizens, for whom swimming can be a lifeline to allow for independent exercise and socialising. All the vital contributions that swimming pools bring to our society are under threat. Without them, we run the risk of a whole generation being unable to swim and communities being without health and social activities.

Swimming is a great safety resource and preventive measure to teach our children water safety. My constituent Lewis Condy has been petitioning tirelessly for the inclusion of swimming in schools. Before I was a member, the Public Petitions Committee considered the petition. It heard evidence about the unequal access to swimming lessons and the link between a child's social and economic background and their opportunity to learn to swim. That means that children are already at a disadvantage in relation to the benefits that swimming can bring because of poverty. Are we really going to make that worse by removing community swimming pools altogether?

A lack of funding has hit the sector hard. I repeat: a lack of funding. That is clear in West Lothian, where three pools have closed. Lewis told me that Broxburn swimming pool, which is one of those affected,

“wasn’t just a swimming pool, it was someone’s rehabilitation. It was their therapy to improve mental health. It was a social club to meet with friends. It was the livelihood of local swimming clubs. It was somebody’s job.”

Lots of disabled or elderly people rely on swimming as the only form of exercise that they can do safely. One constituent told me that closures have given him “sleepless nights”. Another constituent was unable to access council swimming lessons for her children due to extremely high demand. Private swimming lessons are expensive, so lower-income families once again lose out. On this issue, I wrote to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, and I was told that there was no time available to meet. I then wrote to the First Minister—I have received no response. Now, there is no mention of swimming pools in the new programme for government.

The UK Government allocated £63 million to leisure centres with swimming pools in England. When I asked the Scottish Government, the response confirmed that it has benefited from

“consequentials ... added to the overall Scottish block.”—
[*Written Answers*, 19 June 2023; S6W-18739.]

Why was that money not directly invested in saving our pools or providing communities with a natural health service? Why is the Scottish Government not doing enough to save our pools?

17:39

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I congratulate my colleague Liz Smith on securing this members’ business debate on a very essential and highly concerning issue.

As has been said a number of times, Ms Smith’s motion rightly mentions Duncan Scott, who was raised in Clackmannanshire in our Mid Scotland and Fife region and has become one of Scotland’s most successful swimming champions in recent memory. Yet, thanks to the closure of the Alloa leisure bowl, the town no longer has a swimming pool which, honestly, is a disgraceful situation. The nationalist Scottish Government and, in turn, the nationalist-run Clackmannanshire Council are jointly culpable for that travesty. Clackmannan Development Trust said at the time that it was

“Another devastating blow to the wee county with the loss of more jobs; and of course, the loss of all the health, fitness and social activities that the leisure bowl provided for the past 30+ yrs.”

Around 52,000 residents in the county are now unable to find a swimming pool or swimming facility there. One resident said that it was

“So disappointing! The loss of opportunity for children in Clackmannanshire to develop the life skill in swimming, and

the loss of fitness, leisure and recreation facilities for residents who do not have the money or transport to travel out with the county. Sad times!”

These are sad times, indeed. The Scottish Government’s squeezing of council budgets, interlinked with Clackmannanshire Council’s total lack of vision and forward thinking, has meant that no contingency plan was in place at all for a pool in the county. When schools were built in the wee county, not one of them provided a swimming pool. Another resident summed up the situation by saying that schools not building swimming pools was a disgrace and

“a double whammy for Clackmannanshire children.”

Save our pools is a national campaign to highlight the importance of swimming pools and to secure long-term financial investment from the Government for the sustainability of our pools and sport.

We already know, but it is right to point out again, that swimming pools are the nation’s natural health and safety service. Around 14 million people of all ages and abilities swim each year in the United Kingdom, which helps to ensure that they are healthy individuals and, in turn, saves the national health service millions of pounds. We know the difficulties around health inequality in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife and in other regions; sport and swimming give huge health opportunities.

I have been a strong advocate of water safety, too, for many decades. It is only right to point out that swimming pools are natural places for people to learn how to swim, which can lead to an opportunity to save lives. Without pools, we are putting children and other individuals’ lives at risk.

For nearly two decades, I had the privilege of being a councillor in Perth and Kinross, and I was the chair of Perth and Kinross Leisure for a term, where we promoted swimming and safety in water. We have heard about the difficulties of Perth leisure pool, which must be retained and maintained but hangs by a thread because of the funding issues that are coming down the line. Serious questions will have to be asked about that.

I have had the privilege, too, of being the convener of community safety in Perth and Kinross Council for four years. We worked hand in hand with emergency services to do all that we could to publicise the message of safety in water and ensure that it was out there in the community, which did a huge amount to ensure that there were not as many tragedies. However, we find that more and more tragedies occur today—recently, my region saw the horrific loss of a popular and bright young teenager in the River Teith.

As we have heard, the UK Government has pledged more than £60 million to keep swimming pools afloat in England. Scottish Swimming has called on the SNP Government to allocate the money that the UK Government has provided to prevent swimming from becoming unaffordable and unreachable by many in our community.

In a press release, Scottish Swimming said:

“There is cross-party political backing for swimming pools in Scotland”.

That must be looked at and kept going, and we will do all that we can. That money needs to be translated into funding for what is happening in Scotland; the consequential should be used to ensure that our pools survive.

I echo the points that have been made. I ask the minister to acknowledge them in her summing up and to protect and save our pools as she has a duty to do.

17:44

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Liz Smith for lodging her motion and securing this important debate.

Much has already been said about the benefits of learning to swim and of swimming itself—the physical, mental and emotional benefits to individuals, and the social and community wellbeing benefits for wider society. I want to focus my remarks this evening on the campaign to save Bucksburn swimming pool in Aberdeen. That much-loved community pool closed its doors at the end of April this year after Aberdeen City Council cut Sport Aberdeen’s funding by £700,000.

I thank and pay tribute to the save Bucksburn swimming pool campaigners for their excellent work. They have worked tirelessly since the announcement of the closure in March, springing into action very quickly, bringing people together, getting information out to communities and getting organised. They took early steps to bring the pool into community ownership through a community asset transfer, got thousands of people to support a petition to save the pool and organised rallies and meetings. Alongside the save Aberdeen libraries campaign, they also organised for and pursued a judicial review over a failure to consult the public on the closures before any decisions were taken. They did all of that because of the vital role that Bucksburn swimming pool has played in so many people’s lives.

Bucksburn swimming pool, which was Aberdeen’s busiest, provided swimming lessons for children and adults, therapeutic sessions for people with short-term and chronic issues, including physical and other disabilities, and so much more. Bucksburn Amateur Swimming Club

was based there. When the pool was open, it was the only one in the city with built-in disabled access. It truly has been an important facility for many across the city for so long.

The legal action that the anti-cuts campaigners initiated focused on the fact that the city council did not undertake any consultation prior to the decision to close the facilities. Moreover, due regard was not paid to the council’s public sector equality duties, and no comprehensive equality impact assessment was undertaken or published. Given what we know about the disproportionate impact of the loss of such facilities on marginalised communities, that alone was deeply concerning, and it certainly does not foster good faith in, or relationships with, communities.

However, I am pleased to say that, following negotiations in four petitions for judicial review at the Court of Session, the council is now listening to communities and will undertake and publish a full public consultation and equality impact assessment. As a result, Govan Law Centre and Robert Gordon University’s Grampian Community Law Centre have, on behalf of the community campaigners, paused their legal action. However, the issue should never have got that far. It is clear that there are lessons for all of us to learn about how we make decisions, how we include people in those decisions and how we work together. Indeed, Alexander Stewart has already talked about that.

I will close with the words of Kirsty Fraser from the save Bucksburn swimming pool campaign, who issued a rallying cry to encourage people in Aberdeen and further afield to engage in the consultation process. She said:

“I hope this is a positive step in the right direction towards reopening these vital facilities. It will be very difficult for Aberdeen City Council and Sport Aberdeen to justify sticking to the decision to close them when considering the public consultation responses and the equality impact assessments, as the impacts to our communities are vast and profound. It is vital for members of the public to engage in these processes and let the council know what the closures mean to them. This is our chance to make a difference.”

We all have the opportunity to make a difference. I hope that the minister will grasp it with both hands when she sums up.

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

Liz Smith: I thank colleagues who have turned up to this debate. It is very much appreciated.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

17:49

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

I, too, congratulate my colleague Liz Smith on securing this important members' business debate.

I will start my short contribution by sharing with members that I regularly visit Blantyre leisure centre with my daughter Charlotte. As members might be aware, Charlotte has just turned one, and she has gone swimming since she was four months old. She loves the water, and she has taken to paddling her legs in her swimming ring as a duck takes to water. I want Charlotte to be a confident swimmer. That is why swimming pools are so important. Swimming is a vital life skill and, without our swimming pools, children and young people's lives are put at risk.

Further, without swimming pools, talent would also be stifled, as Liz Smith has pointed out. Here in Scotland, we have developed talented people who have gone on to become some of the most successful and well-known Olympians and decorated GB medallists.

We need to save our pools in order to develop and nurture sporting talent but also—and this is most important—to save lives. Recently, I went back to the Sir Matt Busby centre in Bellshill, where I first learned to swim. I was one of the fortunate school pupils in North Lanarkshire to benefit from free swimming lessons during my last year in primary school, something that has long been cut due to reductions in council budgets. Budget cuts have devastating consequences for our communities and, if the Government cannot find a fair settlement for councils, I fear that a number of public swimming pools will close for good.

I want to finish by talking about a fantastic bunch of parents and talented young people at the Bellshill Sharks Amateur Swimming Club, which was founded in 1968. When I had the pleasure of attending one of their swimming sessions, I spoke to some of the young people, who showed me the medals that they had won during swimming meets and, of course, told me the history of the club that they are so proud of. Parents told me how much personal time they give up in order to fit in training and attend the various competitions that their children participate in. The club is a community and it gives young people more than just a vital life skill; it gives them a sporting hobby and friendship as well as routine and discipline.

Not that long ago, the Bellshill Sharks were worried about their home in the Sir Matt Busby

centre, which they feared might not reopen after the pandemic. It took pressure from myself and other councillors at that point before the council would confirm that the centre would reopen. However, that threat is still there, because North Lanarkshire Council has to find £60 million-worth of cuts over the next three years, on top of the £228 million-worth of cuts that have been made over the past decades. The fact of the matter is that there is nothing left for councils to cut, which is why we are seeing councils up and down the country making painful decisions that will have detrimental impacts on our communities.

Fulton MacGregor: The member is right that councils across the UK are facing cuts. However, does she accept that the rise in energy bills, particularly for pools, is a specific concern, along with the cost of chlorine, which I mentioned earlier?

Meghan Gallacher: I absolutely acknowledge the points that Fulton MacGregor has made this afternoon. However, the issues with the Bellshill Sharks and the Sir Matt Busby centre arose during the pandemic, when the council was suggesting that the centre might not be able to be reopened, because of the combined effect of the pandemic and budget cuts.

The Bellshill Sharks are just one example of clubs across Scotland that will be worried about their futures should councils be unable to keep their facilities open. That is why I am backing my colleague Liz Smith's motion tonight and our save our pools campaign.

17:53

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Liz Smith for securing the time for this evening's debate.

Earlier this year, I was involved in the fight to save Bucksburn swimming pool after Sport Aberdeen's devastating decision to close it. That decision, which was a result of funding cuts by Aberdeen City Council, was taken without consultation and without equality impact assessments. At the time, Bucksburn was the only swimming pool in the city with a shallow-stair entry for people with disabilities. Only now, months after the axe came down, are we likely to see a full formal consultation on the closure, because of legal challenges prepared by the Govan Law Centre and the Grampian Community Law Centre. The surrounding community rallied around that beloved facility, and I pay tribute to those involved in the campaign to save the pool, such as Kirsty Fraser and Genevieve Wheeler-Melvin, and their incredible efforts to keep the pool open, as well as to Dr Mark Brown, president of Bucksburn Amateur Swimming Club.

Too many people in decision-making positions forget or are oblivious to the benefits of public swimming pools. The reality is that councils look at facilities such as Bucksburn through the lens of balance sheets and financial liabilities. However, a mental health nurse I met at a save Bucksburn swimming pool demo told me that she swears by swimming as a help to her patients; another woman told me that she has a rare kidney disease and that the water makes swimming a weight-bearing exercise for her; and there was a man with two replacement knees who found walking difficult and therefore needed the pool to exercise and build up his strength. The pool also provided the opportunity for children to learn essential life skills to keep them safe in water. Indeed, hundreds of children were learning to swim at Bucksburn pool before it closed.

There is also a wider story to tell about the state and provision of council-funded leisure facilities elsewhere in my region—and I would note that no Labour or Scottish National Party members from the region are here this evening. In Dundee, a storied saga of ineptitude and dither has led to the city's flagship Olympia swimming pool closing for two years, only nine years after opening. Meanwhile, Dundee City Council is spending more than £100 million replacing two schools—Braeview academy and Craigie high school—that have swimming pool facilities, but there are no plans for a swimming pool at the new East End community campus.

In March 2023, the UK Government announced a £63 million fund for struggling swimming pools. The Scottish Government received Barnett consequential as a result of that, yet we are still in the dark about how that money has been allocated. I hope that Maggie Chapman, who has spoken so passionately about Bucksburn swimming pool, can influence her SNP colleagues to spend the money that they have received from the UK Government to save it.

The social, emotional and health-related value of our swimming pools cannot be ignored, and I urge the Scottish Government to step up to save them.

17:56

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank my colleague Liz Smith for bringing forward this debate. Given the limited time, I will refrain from repeating points that have already been made, other than to say that swimming is a vital and life-saving skill.

I have heard from adults and young people in my constituency who are devastated that more and more north-east swimming pools face closure due to councils being underfunded by this SNP

Government. The issue raised its head when Aberdeen City Council's Bucksburn swimming pool was closed in April and we have heard from many who are fighting to have it reopened. As my colleague Tess White has suggested, it is disappointing that there is no representation from the north-east on the Labour or SNP benches this evening. More than 900 children were enrolled in swimming lessons at that pool, and it is also the only pool in Aberdeen to have built-in disabled access.

I should also point out that, in my Aberdeenshire West constituency, many swimming pools have seen a significant reduction in hours. The pool at Alford community campus has had sessions slashed, with the timetable changing on an almost weekly basis. Last month, I launched a petition to save north-east swimming pools, calling on the Scottish Government to fully fund Live Life Aberdeenshire, to ring fence funding from Westminster for swimming pools and leisure centres and to reverse the current cuts. So far, my petition has been signed by almost 400 supporters.

We have yet to receive a commitment from this SNP Government that Scottish pools will get their share of the additional money that we will receive through the Barnett formula after the UK chancellor announced £63 million of support for swimming pools. In a response to one of my constituents, the Scottish Government stated that it

"has increased the resources available to local government in 2023-24 by more than £793 million, a real terms increase of £376 million or 3%, compared to the 2022-23 Budget figures."

I raised that figure with Aberdeenshire Council. Neither it, nor the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, recognises the figure, nor can they work out how the Scottish Government came to it. I would appreciate an answer from the minister, in writing, about that funding, either to clarify the calculations or to provide an apology for misleading my constituents.

As we have heard today, it remains clear that cuts to local councils have real consequences, and it is time that the SNP gave councils their fair share.

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

17:59

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank the members on all sides of the chamber who have made speeches. I know that we all feel passionately about the subject, and quite rightly

so. I want everyone, regardless of their background, to be able to benefit from sport and physical activity.

We believe that every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim—it is absolutely a life skill. That is why we have been working with Scottish Swimming, Education Scotland, sportscotland and Scottish Water to develop interventions and approaches to provide opportunities for children to become confident, safer and competent swimmers.

Brian Whittle: There is a simple solution. If we had statutory swimming lessons in primary schools, the problem would be solved.

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that, in the curriculum for excellence, we do not make any lessons statutory. However, I will go on to explain to him what we are doing to pilot delivery models that will, we hope, find a way to ensure that those from the most deprived areas in Scotland can benefit from swimming lessons.

The delivery model pilots have been taking place across 2022-23, with four different models of delivery, each piloted by one local authority. Those pilots have been focused on some of the most deprived areas in Scotland. They have now been completed, and an evaluation is currently being undertaken, which will be published in September. We plan to work with Scottish Swimming and sportscotland to take the learning from those pilots and consider the best approach for continued roll-out of a national framework for school swimming over the coming years.

We are also continuing to work closely with all relevant organisations on water safety to explore opportunities to collaborate and help to reduce the number of incidents. We want to raise awareness, in particular among those who are most at risk, so we are working with anglers and paddle boarders. It is positive that the latest figures from the water incident database indicate that, in 2022, accidental drowning fatalities in Scotland decreased in comparison with 2021, which was a particularly devastating year.

The motion for debate also recognises the importance of swimming pools

“in attracting and developing talent”.

Outstanding performances from Scottish athletes on the world stage have demonstrated that Scotland’s approach to performance sport is delivering against agreed outcomes. I was privileged to watch our athletes complete in the Commonwealth games in Birmingham last year, where they won an incredible 13 medals. Most recently, at the Trinbago Commonwealth youth games, Scotland won 11 medals in swimming—seven for Matthew Ward, three for Holly McGill

and three for Evan Davidson. Those fantastic achievements bode well for the future.

Liz Smith: I know that the minister is passionate about that success. I put it to her that the Olympians are very strong on the issue of local swimming pools. Can the minister clarify the point about the Barnett consequentials? As my colleagues have said, we do not yet have clarity about where that money was allocated. One of the minister’s colleagues, at finance question time today, said that the consequentials have been allocated. Can the minister clarify where that money has been allocated?

Maree Todd: I think that every member in the chamber is well aware that, although we got £5.816 million in consequentials as a result of the investment by the UK Government, that money comes within the block grant and it is then for Scottish ministers to decide how to allocate the resources that are available to them. Members can see that we make different decisions in Scotland. That is why, in Scotland, we have seen an increase in funding to our local authorities, whereas in England we are seeing multiple local authorities going bankrupt.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to the minister, but I want to get the actual facts on the matter. As I understand it, the money that she is talking about was specifically for swimming pools. Did it actually go to the swimming pool allocation?

Maree Todd: That money went into the overall Scottish block and decisions were made by Scottish ministers on how to allocate the resources, as they are every year.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: Certainly, but I will need to make progress.

Meghan Gallacher: I thank the minister for giving way, and I will not take up too much of her time.

Can I just clarify that no money went to swimming pools from the block grant? Is that what the minister is confirming to us this afternoon?

Maree Todd: As the member is aware, the funding of these swimming pools is the responsibility of our local authorities, and the local authority block grant was increased this year by 3 per cent. Some councils, such as West Lothian Council, actually got a 4.5 per cent increase in funding revenue. I note that Foysol Choudhury did not mention once that West Lothian is a Labour council in coalition with the Conservatives, and I can understand his shame on that front.

That is where I would say the money has gone; the money has been allocated, as it always is. A spending decision might be made in England, but

that does not mean that we spend the money in the same way. We adequately fund our local authorities; members can see the fundamental difference in that respect, given the number of local authorities going bankrupt in England and the fact that none has gone bankrupt in Scotland.

The motion also recognises the importance of swimming pools

“in attracting and developing talent”.

I must admit that the fantastic achievements of the young people of Scotland bode very well for the future, but we will all agree that the appropriate facilities must be in place to provide opportunities.

Foyso Choudhury: Can I just clarify whether it is only West Lothian Council that is closing pools or whether that is happening everywhere else in Scotland? I totally agree with the minister that the number of swimmers and all the swimming going on in Scotland are positive things, but, by closing all the swimming pools in every council, are we not preventing Scotland from having future champions?

Maree Todd: Let me be absolutely clear: the total revenue support provided to West Lothian Council was £405 million, which was an increase of £17.2 million. The amount was significantly larger than the Barnett consequentials that were mentioned. That increase of 4.4 per cent was the second highest in Scotland, and the council is closing three swimming pools. In England, there have been 400 swimming pool closures since the Tories came to power—*[Interruption.]* If members allow me to proceed, we might be able to get into a mature discussion about some of the challenges facing the sector.

As we will all acknowledge, swimming pools and leisure centres are often at the heart of a community. They give an opportunity to bring together families; provide a place for those recovering from injury to exercise safely; offer regular clubs and activities where friendships as well as confidence and skills can be developed; and present the opportunity for athletes to progress and achieve success. These community hubs make a positive contribution to building healthier, happier and stronger communities.

However, we all know that local authorities are operating under very challenging financial circumstances and that, in some cases, pools have closed or are under threat. Rising energy costs have had a significant impact. We know that that increased expenditure puts pressure on budgets and can mean that other improvements, including energy efficiency, must be delayed or abandoned. Given that we all agree that increasing energy costs and their impact lie at the root of the challenge faced by swimming pools, I wonder whether we can also all agree that it is

disappointing that the UK Government decided to exclude community leisure from the energy bills discount scheme. That would have fixed the problem at source.

We need a sustainable estate that is focused on the needs of people, energy efficient and accessible. That is why sportscotland is supporting Scottish Swimming in undertaking the Scottish swimming facilities project, which is a detailed piece of work that will allow us to understand accurately the current pool provision and life cycle and to predict the landscape in the short, medium and long terms.

The Scottish swimming facilities project has three phases: first, the provision of a high-level update on the change since the report “A Ticking Timebomb” was produced in 2001; secondly, the provision of good practice guidance on creating a more economically and environmentally sustainable swimming pool estate; and, thirdly, work with pilot local authority areas to implement the guidance to demonstrate the future sustainability of the swimming estate.

Particularly when public finances are under so much pressure, any investment needs to ensure that sustainable facilities are in the right places to serve their local communities’ needs. To truly safeguard our estate for the long term, we need to have a mature conversation. The Scottish swimming facilities project will help to provide some of the evidence for future decision making.

For our part, the Scottish Government has increased the resources that are available to local government by more than £793 million in 2023-24, which is a real-terms increase of £376 million, or 3 per cent.

Local authorities are independent corporate bodies.

Alexander Burnett: Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: No, as I am in the closing moments of my speech.

It is for local authorities to manage their own budgets and allocate their resources—including to leisure facilities—on the basis of local needs and priorities.

We will absolutely continue to work in partnership with local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve. As the minister who is responsible for sport, I am committed to working with the sector to consider how we best provide support to ensure sustainable and accessible facilities.

Meeting closed at 18:12.

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

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